

# Heroes Ever After

a free bnha x disney zine



a littlehoneyfox zines production



# Thanks from the mod team

Thank you for your support by downloading this zine!

This is our third zine as littlehoneyfox zines, and it was our biggest project yet. I couldn't have pulled off this project without my wonderful team. Linh, thank you for putting together this zine and all of our graphics! Chi, thank you for being a pillar of support for our contributors (as well as myself.) I am so thankful for Linh and Chi's encouragement, thoughts, and hard work they put into this zine!

Every contributor in this zine has created such wonderful pieces that we hope you'll love as much as we do! Please support the contributors by checking out their socials.

Thank you, again, for downloading this digital copy of *Heroes Ever After*!

Mod Honey

Mod Chi

*Heroes Ever After* has been my first experience modding a zine, but certainly not my first experience working with this amazing team. I cannot express how grateful I am to each and every one of you for contributing your time and energy to make this project as successful as it has been! I've learned a lot, and I couldn't have seen it through without the always wonderful Honey and Linh to work with! It's truly been a joy and I can't wait to see what projects everyone comes up with in the future.

We hope you enjoy this zine as much as we've enjoyed putting it together. Plus Ultra!!

In the words of Disney's greatest hit, *High School Musical*:  
"We're all in this together."

Thank you so much for downloading *Heroes Ever After* and don't forget to drink water, be safe, have fun, be yourself, love yourself, and all that jazz.

Mod Linh



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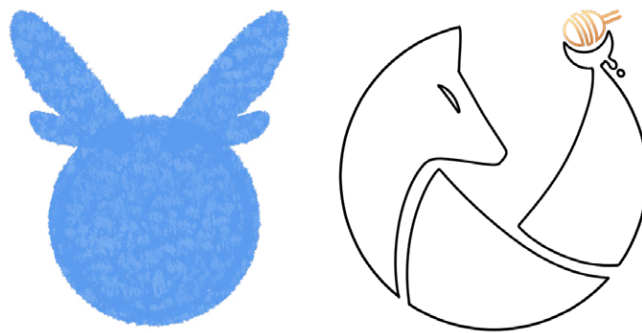
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Heroes Ever After is a multi-ship zine, meaning you may find that some pieces are not to your taste due to various reasons. Please respect the contributors who very much love and enjoy their ships and skip over pieces you may not enjoy.

Content Warnings will be marked.

—Heroes Ever After Team/Little Honey Fox Zines



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# Supernova

A *Treasure Planet* AU by Ohmytheon

Touya was nearly done scrubbing the last pot when a pile of slimy, disgusting plates and bowls were dumped into the sink, splashing dirty water all over him. He yelped, stumbling backward, and would've fallen on his ass had a metal hand not grabbed him by the arm to keep him standing.

"What the-?"

"Careful, lad," a familiar voice teased from behind. "You don't want to fall and break your neck."

Turning back around, Touya glared at the person holding his arm. "Thanks a lot, Sako."

"My pleasure," Sako replied, letting go of Touya and striding over toward a pot of simmering stew. The cook snatched up a ladle and deftly spun it in the air between his metal fingers before dipping it into the soup to take a delicate sip. "Mm, not quite there yet. I'd give it another hour. Have you been stirring it?"

"Yeah, yeah," Touya sighed, rolling his eyes back to the new stack of dishes. "Every twenty minutes, just like you said, and a pinch of salt in the last turn."

Sako turned around and folded his arms across his chest, a smirk tugging at his lips. "Keep this up, boy, and you might become an actual assistant instead of a dishwasher in a few years."

"Great," Touya muttered dryly. Needless to say, when he'd managed to swindle his way onto this ship in order to escape his father's iron grip and go on the adventure of a lifetime, spending hours scrubbing everything from the deck to each spoon hadn't been a part of the plan. He'd definitely pictured something more...spectacular.

Even with his back turned to him, Touya could feel Sako's eyes on him and hear the tap of his fingers along his metal arm. Irritated, he had no intention of turning back around to face him. If Sako had something to say, he could speak up first. Touya was nothing if not stubborn. His father used to say it was his only strength. He was weak, slow, and stupid, but he never gave up first. He'd rather be smacked down first, something that had happened more often than not when he couldn't live up to his old man's expectations.

"You know what?" Sako finally said. "You've been down here for a while, and these dishes aren't going anywhere. Why don't you take a break?"

Touya spun around, his blue eyes gleaming with excitement. "Seriously?" When Sako nodded his head, Touya threw the scrubber back into the sink and ripped his



apron off, practically groaning as he stretched his arms. "I thought you were gon-na run me ragged. Finally, I can take a nap."

"Well, you *could* do that," Sako said, holding out a hand, "or you could take a solar cruise around the ship with—"

Before Sako could even finish the statement, Touya threw the apron aside and bolted out of the kitchen up the stairs to the deck. He didn't need to be offered twice. Every time a crew member took a cruise around the ship to check the area, he'd watch enviously, wishing he was the one driving the cruiser. He didn't know how it was possible to feel locked up on a ship out in space, but it wasn't fun. He didn't belong inside.

He belonged out there.

By the time Sako reached the loading bay, Touya had already done most of the work prepping the cruiser for launch. The itch to escape had become so unbearable that he was practically buzzing with energy. Sako helped him with the last of it, jumping on the small solar cruiser with the ease that most cooks didn't have. There were a lot of things about Sako that didn't line up with a simple ship cook, but he'd learned most of his questions would go unanswered or deflected at best. When Touya unraveled the last rope keeping the ship tied down, it dropped through the opening into the open space.

And then Sako was gone.

With each passing second, the energy slowly faded from Touya, like the sun setting on a planet, until finally he retreated from the edge. Despite thinking he was used to it, disappointment settled deep in his bones. Sako hadn't actually planned on allowing him to join the solar cruise. It had been a trick, one he could laugh about when he returned.

Feeling foolish, Touya glared at the opening. He should've known better than to get his hopes up, but it was hard. Back when he was little, before his failures had stacked too high for his father to ignore, he used to go on solar cruises with him, taking in every detail about the ship, watching, listening, learning. He'd loved it—loved the feeling of freedom that only flight could grant—but it was the only thing he could get a handle on.

Eventually, his father stopped taking him on trips. He took Natsuo, and when his younger brother didn't prove adept at flying, he started to take Shouto, who took to it like a galaxy whale in space. He hadn't even bothered with Fuyumi, who must've surely been hurt about being left out completely. It didn't matter how good Touya was—how hard he tried, how fast he flew, how agile the ship could be under his touch—he would never be good enough and was left to watch his father leave him time and time again.

"What are you doing just standing there like a guppy? Jump in!"

Touya startled and peered over the edge, only to be shocked when he saw that Sako had returned. "What?"



"You want me to teach you how to drive this thing or not?" Sako asked, gesturing to the steering handle.

A grin stretched across Touya's face, and he dropped through the opened bay doors and onto the small ship. It rocked, but both of them rolled with it. Sako had come back. He didn't have to do that, but he did. Once Touya was in his seat and gripping the handle, Sako dropped down and started to elaborate on the finer details of the solar cruiser, but Touya wasn't listening. *He* didn't have to do that. It had been a while since he'd flown this specific type of cruiser, preferring his single board that his father had destroyed after multiple impoundments, but memories of their lessons flooded his senses.

The feel of the handle, the hum of the engine, the flickering lights of the solar panel sails, the smell of stardust—it all came back to him like it was yesterday, and for the first time, he let the memories guide him instead of haunt him.

"Now," Sako said, "you have to be careful when you first—"

Touya didn't listen. He released the sails and revved up the engine, and the cruiser took off, knocking Sako back in his seat and nearly blowing the hat off his head. Well, his father had always said he was a terrible listener—doing his own thing, making snap judgments and rash decisions, constantly getting into trouble. Maybe he was right.

But Touya couldn't care less, not with the wind in his inky black hair and the stars glittering around them.

"Whoa, kid!" Sako exclaimed, holding onto the brim of his hat.

Angling the handle toward him, he turned to sails, and the cruiser swung around the front of the ship. It flew upward, as if trying to touch the stars, and then he forced it to dip dramatically. Upon pressing a few buttons and twisting the handle, the sails snapped shut and the cruiser spiraled. Genuine laughter burst from Touya as Sako clung tightly to the edge of the cruiser, his shouts lost to the wind.

When Touya whipped the sails open to stop their spinning and evened out the cruiser, he finally allowed it to slow down to actual cruising speed. Turning on the auto-cruise, he let go of the handle and leaned back in his seat, placing his hands behind his head and staring up into space. The stars glittered around him, a light in the dark expanse that was space, so close he thought he could actually touch them.

Now, this was the life he'd dreamed of every night. When he accidentally found a treasure map inside an old piece of junk kept in his father's study, he'd thought that he was on his way to have a grand adventure. A beautiful ship, an experienced but excited crew, a captain that would take him under his wing (as his father should have done), the whole universe ahead of him to explore until they finally found Treasure Planet—he'd have it all.

And then, in his panic to escape his father's wrath for stealing and running away from, he'd tripped and lost the orb to a scrupulous captain. The only reason he

hadn't been left behind entirely was because he'd stowed away on the ship. By the time the crew found him, it was too late to turn back. He'd barely managed to avoid walking the plank when Sako stepped in and swore to work him so hard that he'd regret it. Right now, he regretted it a little less.

"That was some flying, kid," Sako said, settling down in his seat.

"Guess I've got a knack for it," Touya quipped, closing his eyes and relaxing. He could get used to this. Maybe he could convince the captain to let him do minor patrols, scout their path, and checks on the ship. It would be a far better use of him than peeling potatoes, cleaning dishes, and swabbing the deck.

Sako hummed thoughtfully. "Well, I wouldn't expect anything less from the son of the great Commodore Todoroki."

Touya's eyes snapped open, and he rocketed forward in his seat, choking out, "Wh-what?"

"You hid it well," Sako told him, scratching his chin. "I don't think anyone on the ship knows—or then you really would've been thrown overboard. No one would want to deal with his retribution."

"I..." Touya didn't know what to say. While lying awake in his bunk at night, he'd thought up all sorts of lies if someone confronted him about his identity, but no one had second-guessed him when he told them his name was Dabi. Very likely, he wasn't the only one on this ship going by a different name. It paid to hide aboard a ship run by a ragtag crew. However, now that he was being questioned, everything he'd practiced died on his lips. "How?"

Sako reached over and tugged Touya's hair, pulling his hand away before Touya could swat it. "Well, after a month or so in space, your red roots are starting to show. Not to mention the same blue eyes, the fact that you know more about ships and space than any street orphan would, and you have that same look of contempt on your face."

"I do not," Touya grumbled irritably.

"Then what's with the look on your face now?" Sako teased. Touya wiped the scowl off his face, but Sako caught it anyway and laughed. Damn him. Just when he was starting to think that Sako might not be so bad, he had to pull this stunt. "I'd heard rumors that one of the Commodore's sons had run off, but of course he wouldn't want that information made public, so it stayed just that, a rumor."

"Of course not." Touya rolled his eyes. "I caused him enough trouble as it was."

Sako snorted. "Being capable of flying like that? I can only imagine."

Touya folded his arms across his chest and looked away in an attempt to hide his sour expression. He didn't look like his father. He *didn't*. (He did, but not enough to make his father happy. He'd been too thin, too scrawny, for his taste—too delicate like his mother, certainly not built for the Navy.) He didn't fly like his father either.



He was reckless and dangerous—but he was also *better*.

"My father taught me how to fly," Touya said, glaring into the cosmos. "He wanted me to join the Navy, become a captain, be a sharpshooter—you know, just like him." He swallowed, memories of the past fluttering through his mind: his clumsy attempts at holding a blaster, passing out while running, struggling to do even four pull-ups. Weak, weak, weak. "I couldn't do it. All I could do was fly."

"Exceptionally well, if I say so," Sako added.

"I didn't put it to good use," Touya admitted. "I got into a lot of trouble—caused my mom a good amount of grief, pissed off my dad, alienated my siblings. He would've sent me away to military school had he not known I would flop out. I was a failure in every way."

The glare faded from his eyes, anger seeping from his bones. Being angry was exhausting. Sometimes, he hated his dad so much that it felt like he might burn to ashes from the inside out. It was fiery, his anger so consuming that it almost choked him, like a star self-destructing. At least out here he had room to breathe, even when he was stuck in the galley doing shit work. The captain ignored him, along with most of the crew, so it was just Sako bossing him around, but he wasn't like his father.

"I don't see a failure."

Touya turned to peer askance at Sako. "Oh yeah?"

"I see someone willing to risk it all to chase their dream—to become their own person." Sako let out a sigh and took his hat off, running a finger along the brim. "It isn't easy. You're bound to lose something along the way—a sliver of yourself, a bit of your past, maybe even part of your future—especially when other people are holding you down."

That was exactly what his father had been doing. Touya grew up with his father's hand gripping the back of his neck, pushing him to grind and become the man *he* wanted. In the beginning, Touya had done everything he could to please his old man. He'd go to bed with his hands covered in bandages from blaster burns, his legs and arms sore and heavy from physical training, his cheeks red from tears. And when he was pushed aside, all that pent-up rage boiled over, and he did everything he could to make his father regret it.

But anger wasn't freeing. It tied him down too, kept him grounded, and he wanted to escape it as much as he wanted to show up his father.

"Is that what happened to you?" Touya asked, his eyes flickering to Sako's mechanical arm.

Sako lifted his hand, flexing the metal fingers more deftly than any flesh and blood ones could move. "You can't be the same person at the end of your journey that you were in the beginning."

"Was it worth it?" Touya thought of the orb sitting on the captain's desk, the treasure map he could find at a whim. When he'd stolen it from his father's study, he was sure

it was, but now...

"Most of the time," Sako replied honestly.

"And the other times?"

Spinning his hat between his fingers, Sako dropped it back on his head. "I think of how I could've lost much more than just an arm." He rapped the metal with his flesh and blood knuckles. "Besides, with this thing, I've got a few tricks up my sleeve."

Touya eyed him suspiciously. "Sounds like more than just a cook's life to me."

"Nah, me? I'm nobody." Sako flashed him a sly grin, which definitely didn't help his case. Like Touya had thought before, he wasn't the only one hiding who he was and his past on this ship. "Just as I imagine knowing how to fly like that would sure come in handy in a pinch."

"Didn't mean much in the end," Touya said.

"Ah, but that was down there," Sako pointed out, gesturing vaguely. "You're in space now. Maybe it's where you belonged all along."

Touya harrumphed. "With some ragtag crew going on a wild goose chase?"

"You might fit in better than you think if you give it a chance," Sako told him.

Maybe, but it was hard to say. The crew didn't pay attention to him much, but then again, he never tried to talk to them either. He didn't want to admit it, but he'd kind of thought he was better than them. He might've hated his father, but he was still a Todoroki. That name instilled both awe and fear in many people across the galaxy. Plus, he was raised with the best education, especially when compared to most of the crew. Even if he was broke now, he'd grown up with money.

Okay, so maybe he was the asshole in this scenario.

"C'mon, kid," Sako said, ruffling Touya's hair and then taking control of the cruiser. "We can't laze about here all evening. You've got dishes to finish."

Touya shot him a flat look. "You mean 'we', right?"

Sako turned the cruiser back toward the galley and said nothing, but the smile tugging at his lips spoke volumes. Touya huffed and sank in his seat. No, Sako was definitely a bastard still, even if he understood him better than his own father. Nonetheless, his words echoed in Touya's mind. He was chasing his dream. He couldn't let this chance of a lifetime go to waste, no matter the cost.

After all, he was finally free, and it was time he flew to the stars.



AFTER ALL,  
HE WAS FINALLY FREE,  
AND IT WAS TIME HE  
FLEW TO THE STARS.







SP2020



I GOT FRIENDS ON THE



Other Side







# Eri and Baku Stitch

A *Lilo & Stitch* AU by Amuk

"We're going to be late." Eri looked away from the car window to the front seat, where her mom was glaring at her dad. Arms crossed, jaw jutting out slightly, she was the picture of irritation. "Again."

Outside, the rain fell, quietly tapping on the glass. It sounded like a song and Eri swayed in time with it. There were few things she looked forward to more than dance class, though she still wasn't good at it. Maybe she could practice with her brothers. Or, rather, brother—Izuku was a terrible dancer, worse than her.

Her dad smiled at her mom playfully, looking at her over his spectacles. "Didn't you hear? It's in fashion?"

Eri giggled. Even her mom couldn't help but crack a smile. Almost nothing could stand up to her dad's jokes. Looking at her through the rear-view mirror, he winked.

"Don't think I didn't see that!" her mom warned, but the fire was gone from her tone. Sighing, she fiddled with the radio, flipping through the channels. "Next time, we leave when I say so, okay?"

"Roger!" Her dad mock saluted.

"Roger!" Eri chirped, following suit.

"You two..." Sighing, her mom turned off the radio and looked back at her. "Honey, why don't you practice the song they're teaching you? What was it again?"

"Aloha o..." Eri frowned, fumbling over the last sound. "Ow?"

"Ow?" Her mom chuckled. "Well, you are learning three languages. Maybe your brothers can help you with it? I'm not all that good."

"It's easy." Her dad hummed the song softly. "It's a beautiful song. Let's sing it together, Eri! One, Two, Thr—"



"—ee is the answer."

Eri blinked. The window she was staring through was her classroom, the voice her teacher's. Any sound of shattering glass, of a horn blaring or tires screeching were all in her head. Unconsciously, her hand touched her forehead on the scar that was barely visible through her long hair.

She was safe. That was a memory and she was safe. Her stomach flipfopped, and she forced back bitter vomit that wormed its way up her throat.

Turning back to the front of the classroom, she eyed her first-grade teacher. Mr. Toshinori, looking as frail as ever, coughed into his elbow. It sounded like he was hacking up a lung. Every part of him looked like he should be in the hospital. Finished, he straightened up and smiled feebly. "What do you think will happen if you add two and two?"

"Mr. Toshinori, don't you think you should quit being a teacher?" From the front row, Eri's classmate Mertle asked, not bothering to raise her hand. She flipped her red hair with a hand. "You're dying."

"I'm not—" He hunched over as he coughed again.

*BRINNGGGG!*

Interrupting him, the bell chimed a second time, letting them know that school was over. A dozen chairs scraped against the floor as students immediately leaped to their feet.

Struggling to maintain some semblance of control, Mr. Toshinori said, "Guys, I know this is our last day of class, but don't forget—"

It was too late, half the class had already stampeded to the exit, into the waiting hands of their parents. Eri felt bad for him.

"Hey."

Eri tore her eyes away from her sad teacher. Mertle stood beside her, arms crossed, a sneer on her face. Looking down at her, she raised a brow, "You heard the bell, right?"

Her friends stood behind her, identical snobbish looks on their faces. "Right?" they echoed.

Eri nodded. "Y-yes."

"You spend all day staring outside. At least you're not deaf, and just a space case." Mertle pushed up her glasses. "Why'd you drop out of dance class? Is it cause you suck?"

Dance class. Eri bit her cheek. "I..."

*Let's sing together.*

"What's going on here?" As though sensing her distress, Mr. Toshinori came over, a disapproving frown on his face. "Mertle, are you—"

"I'm just cheering her up!" Mertle snapped back, flipping her hair and walking away. "The weirdo doesn't talk otherwise."

"Mertle! Detention!" Mr. Toshinori sighed, shaking his head before crouching down in front of Eri. Giving her a gentle smile, he asked, "Are you okay?"



She didn't know the answer to that question anymore. Eri nodded her head.

"If you need anything, you can talk to me." He rubbed her head. "I know it must be hard these days, but I'm here for you."

The door swung open with a loud bang and her older brother Izuku stood at the entrance, panting. "Eri!" he jogged to her table, glancing up at the clock. "I'm sorry I'm late!" He bowed his head once. "I wasn't fast enough."

"I-it's okay," Eri mumbled, shaking her hands in front of her. Sweat dripped down her brother's forehead and her shoulders sunk. Every day, after school, he ran to her classroom. Izuku didn't join any clubs, didn't hang out with his friends, just made a beeline straight to her.

She wasn't worth it.

"Any faster, my boy, and you should be on the track team." Mr. Toshinori chuckled, resting a hand on Izuku's shoulder.

"M-m-mr. Toshinori!" Izuku's eyes grew wide as he stared up at the teacher. Flustered, he ran a hand through his hair. "I'm not that fast. Just..."

"You weren't that late today." Mr. Toshinori squeezed his shoulder, his voice gentling. "And I said before, I don't mind waiting."

"That's fine! I've got this." Izuku pumped his hands, giving Eri a bright smile. "Right?"

She nodded in response and his smile dimmed a notch.



Eri blinked awake, her throat parched as she stared up at the dark ceiling. Outside, the leaves rustled as a cool night breeze blew through them, crickets chirping restlessly as the hour wore on. *Water*, she thought. Her tongue felt like sand in her mouth. She glanced at the table next to her bed. Usually, her mom would have put a glass there, would have brushed back her bangs before kissing her goodnight.

She wiped her eyes. Slipping out of bed, Eri quietly padded out of her room. To her left, at the end of the long hallway, was a locked door. Her parents' room. Mirio had shut it when she came back from the hospital, locking it tight. *We can deal with it later*, he'd said.

She heard the word *Never*. The door had only opened once, before the cremation, and Mirio had gone in alone. Izuku had read her a story while they waited downstairs, his eyes sliding away by the end of every paragraph. Eri couldn't remember what the story was. Maybe he'd never finished it.

No, she didn't need to go there. What she needed was water and that was downstairs. Eri turned to her right, toward the stairs. The floorboards creaked lightly with every step. Her brothers' bedroom lights stayed off.

"What did he..."

"Just..."

At the top of the stairs, Eri froze as she heard voices. Quickly, she sat down on the stairs, slowly lowering herself down the steps until she could hear them better. In the living room, Mirio sat on the couch, hands clasped, jaw resting on his knuckles as he thought about it. Izuku paced back and forth as though the answers could be found if he walked enough.

"They'll just take us?" Izuku asked, his hands curled into fists. "They'll separate us?"

"If I can't prove that I'm taking good care of you, yes." Mirio raked a hand through his hair. "Money's a little tight because of all the bills, so they're concerned."

"But...that's just unfair!" Izuku stopped walking, his arms at his side. "I...what if I get a job too?" His expression brightened. "I can get a job after school and-and-and I can go to work after I graduate!"

"No!" Mirio sprang to his feet and Eri shivered. She'd never seen her brother look so angry. Even Izuku took a step backward. Calming down, he smiled and grabbed Izuku's hands, carefully uncurling his fists. "You can't daydream while on the job, you know? And how're you going to finish all your homework when you're working."

"But—"

"It'll be fine," Mirio interrupted, his smile even brighter as he pulled Izuku close and hugged him tight. "Look, tomorrow I'm starting a new job, a nice one down by the beach. And Nejire and Tamaki said they'd help out as much as they can. So don't you worry about money, unless you want to be like Scrooge."

"But—"

As though to prove his point, Mirio quacked.

"O-okay." Izuku relaxed slightly.

"And you're going to university." Mirio pulled back, brushing Izuku's hair out of his face. "It'd be a crime to keep the greatest mind out of university."

Izuku bit his lip. "You didn't get to go."

"Yet." Mirio bopped him on the nose, winking. "I'm just delaying it a little, that's all."

"You will go, okay?" Izuku pressed, a determined expression on his face. "After me, right?"

"As long as I can use your notes." Mirio chuckled. "Now, let's go to bed; you've got school tomorrow and I can't be late for my first day."

Eri scrambled backwards, trying to keep out of sight, but the stairs creaked at that



moment. Immediately, her brothers looked behind them, up at the stairs.

"Eri!" Mirio's eyes widened before he gave her the same reassuring smile. "What's up?"

"E-e-eri?" Izuku had always been the worst liar.

Getting up, she weakly waved. "Water," she mumbled.

"Water! Got it!" Izuku ran to the kitchen.

"Careful not to spill!" Mirio called out, heading up the stairs toward her. "Let's go to your room to wait for him, okay?"

She nodded, grabbing her brother's hand. It was warm. This close, she could see the bags under his eyes, the lines on his face. He never looked so tired, so old before. Maybe it would be better if he didn't have to take care of her, if she lived away.

As she slipped back into bed, Mirio carefully tucked her blanket around her. "Still kinda chilly, isn't it? Maybe we'll get Christmas in July!" He sat on the edge of her bed, his hand gently brushing the bangs away from her eyes. Did their mom do that for him too? "You okay, Eri?"

"Yeah," she mumbled.

"Got your water!" Izuku stumbled in. Coming to a stop next to her head, he offered her the glass. "Did you have a bad dream?"

"No," she answered truthfully, sitting up to drink. Her mouth still felt parched. Maybe the thirst would never go away.

"You know what we haven't done in a long time? Singing lullabies!" Mirio took the glass from her and set on the side table. Imploringly, he leaned forward and asked, "Do you want to sing with us, Eri?"

"No," she answered immediately.

Mirio's expression tightened but he kept his smile up. "Alright then, we'll sing instead. Close your eyes."



Eri rocked her feet back and forth as she sat at the kitchen table. It would be another hour till dinner, another hour till Mirio came back from the beach. Beside her, Izuku poured over sheets of paper, filling line after line with tiny, cramped writing. His homework was much harder than hers. And longer.

Outside, something metallic rattled. Eri looked at the kitchen window curiously, but from here she couldn't see anything. Izuku hadn't noticed, muttering under his breath something about sins and triangles. Sneaking a glance at him, Eri slipped off her chair and headed to the backdoor.

Opening it a crack, she peeked outside. There was a concrete slab, a grassy hill, two trashcans—

A trashcan rattled and Eri jumped. Was it a mongoose? A monster? Staring at it, she waited, but the can didn't move. It only rattled every now and then, as though someone was rolling around in it. Behind her, Izuku was still concentrating on his homework. She didn't want to bother him; it was time she fought monsters on her own. Gathering her courage, Eri slipped outside.

"Hello?" she called out as she got closer, clasping her hands together nervously. "Are you a monster?"

The trashcan fell over in response and she tried not to shriek as she jumped back. For a second, nothing happened, and then this big red thing crawled out. Eri stared. What was it, a dog? A cat? It was a big, furry animal, with four legs and long antenna sticking out of its forehead. Looking a little dizzy, it shook its head and coughed. Clouds of black smoke escaped its lips.

It had to be a monster. A fire monster. It looked her, with big, unblinking eyes, before returning to the garbage. Tearing apart the bag with its claws, it nosed through the refuse.

Eri stared. It was a hungry monster.



"Hey, are you here?" Eri whispered, sneaking out of the house with a plate of meat. This was what having a pet was like, she imagined. Every day without fail, the red monster would come to sniff through their trash. Izuku was always busy with homework and Eri finished hers early, so she snuck out to feed him.

The second she set down the plate, he reappeared. When she backed away, he crept closer, sniffing the plate suspiciously before wolfing down everything on the plate. And almost the plate itself, but when she'd chased him away, he got the picture. He was a smart monster.

So smart that he wouldn't let her pet him. Eri frowned. This wasn't at all like having a pet. All she did was feed him. Like right now. As she put down the plate, the monster poked his head out of a bush.

"Arrwhhh?" he growled.

"Can I touch you?" she asked hopefully.

The monster hissed, shaking his head. His long, floppy ears whipped back and forth.

Shoulders slumped, she walked back to the back door and sat on the ground. Deeming it safe, the monster jumped out of the bushes and rushed to the plate. He gave a happy grunt at the sight before immediately devouring everything in front of him.

Smoke rings still escaped his mouth every now and then. Maybe one day there'd be fire too. Eri glanced at the distant shape of the volcano. Her mom (and her heart hurt at the thought) used to point at it, calling it by the names of her native tongue. *Kazan*. "Bakugou."

Before she could say anything else, the monster's ears straightened and he looked at her. He grunted.

She wasn't sure what to make of that, only he looked a bit happier. Eri tried again, "Bakugou?"

The monster looked at her again, grunting once more. Was that his name? She nodded. "I'm Eri."

"E-ry," the monster, Bakugou, repeated.

"Can I pet you?" she asked, holding out her hand.

True to form, he ignored her and finished devouring his meal.



"Oh no." Izuku paled as he rifled through his backpack. Hastily, he pulled everything out: loose sheets of paper, textbooks, a gumwrapper. Turning his bag upside down, he shook it twice but nothing else came out. "Oh noooooo."

Eri tore her eyes away from the window. The trashcans hadn't rattled yet; Bakugou hadn't arrived yet. "Something wrong?"

"My homework." He slumped on the kitchen table and bemoaned, "I left the math sheet in my locker." Hands on his hair, he tugged on the curly tufts. "And it's due tomorrow."

His teacher, Mr. Aizawa, was oddly strict and Eri gnawed her lip. "Are you in trouble?"

"Yeah." He banged his head on the table once more before sitting up suddenly. "Iida!"

"Iida?" Eri cocked her head. She vaguely remembered meeting her brother's friends. He was the tall, serious one, the one who smiled stiffly.

"I can get a copy from him." Jumping to his feet, Izuku dashed to the door and swung it open. Slipping into his shoes, he dashed out. The door barely closed before he ran back in. "Eri."

"Y-yes!" She ran to the door.

"Is it okay if I leave you alone? It's just for ten minutes, okay?" Izuku looked at her beseechingly.

"T-that's fine." Eri nodded her head eagerly. Any other answer and he'd stay behind; she'd already caused him enough trouble with adding to the list. "Good luck."



"Thank you!" Izuku hugged her tightly and then he was off again, the door banging shut.

The house quiet. Eri looked behind her. The lights were on in the kitchen and living room, but nowhere else. Now that she thought about it, it was the first time she'd been left alone. She padded quietly to the kitchen, turn on the water, and filled a glass. Maybe she should turn on the tv; she didn't like how quiet it was.

Outside, the trash cans rattled and Eri jumped. Leaning on the sink, she peeked outside to find the red monster outside. He growled, hungry, and she lowered herself to the kitchen floor. She'd almost forgotten it was time to feed him; she wasn't entirely alone then.

She wasn't alone. Eri glanced at the front door. Izuku wouldn't be back for a while. It couldn't hurt to let him in, just for a little, would it? No one had to know. Opening the side door, Eri stared at the expectant Bakugou. He growled at her once but did little else. Hesitantly, she suggested, "Come in."

Bakugou didn't move, only giving her a dubious look.

"The food's inside," she added, stepping back.

He gave her a second look. As his stomach grumbled, he reluctantly got on his feet and crawled over. At the threshold, he hesitated. His belly rumbled once more, and he trotted in.

Eri sighed with relief and followed him to the kitchen. Now inside, all of his reluctance was gone and Bakugou was investigating everything in the house, especially the knives for some reason. He opened every cupboard, poked his nose into every shelf, and Eri winced as spoons and pots fell out in his wake.

"You can't do that," she reprimanded, picking up the fallen cutlery.

If Bakugou was listening, he didn't react. Instead, he swung open the fridge, far stronger than his appearance suggested. "Food!" he uttered, the word barely recognizable.

"You can't—"

"Eri!"

"Are you okay?"

Eri dropped the pans with a huge clang as she heard not just Izuku's voice, but Mirio's as well. He was home early. Really early. It hadn't even been five minutes since Izuku had left. "H-here," she replied back, running to the fridge. Trying to grab Bakugou, she whispered, "You have to go!"

He dropped an egg on her head.

"Don't be scared, but we have a guest today! From Social Services!" Mirio said. There was a thud as something fell, followed by the sound of footsteps.

She paled. That was even worse than just her brothers. "You really have to go!" Jumping up and down, she managed to grab Bakugou's foot. As she yanked him, she fell backwards with a soft groan.

Bakugou reacted quickly by pulling his leg free and scrambling up the counter. He hissed at her, smoke escaping his mouth again, and she wasn't sure if she'd imagined the flicker of fire this time. Before she could get on her feet, Mirio and Izuku were standing at the kitchen entrance.

"As you can see." Mirio gestured. "She's..." He trailed off, his eyes widening as he took in the mess. "Uh..."

"What happened?" Izuku gasped.

"Kids are kids?" Mirio suggested, laughing nervously.

Behind him, the tall, reedy man adjusted his glasses. "I see."

"What do you see?" Izuku asked, still staring at the mess. "And what is that?"

Bakugou didn't take kindly to being gawked at. He ran along the counter and Eri wasn't sure if he was trying to escape or attack her brother. Either way, if he leapt out of the kitchen, the rest of their house would be as messy as this room. Chasing Bakugou, she grabbed him as he leapt off the counter. An entirely unwanted action, he struggled in her arms, trying to escape.

"You can't!" she said, tightening her grip. Panicking when he didn't relent, Eri glanced at her brothers. What was she supposed to do now? Before she could think about it, she started humming. By now, she had forgotten the words to the song, but the tune, the tune was still there.

Slowly, Bakugou relaxed in her grip.

"We heard pets are great for therapy," Mirio quickly explained, pulling the social worker away. "Still training him though."

"Yep, training, definitely training," Izuku chimed in, propelling the stranger forward by pushing on his back.

As they headed to the entrance, Eri slumped to the floor. Letting go of Bakugou, she sighed. That wasn't good. Her brothers would be in even more trouble now. And it was all her fault.

"Arawww," Bakugou growled, sounding almost friendly.

"It's okay." She held out a hand. "You're a problem but I'm one too."

Bakugou stepped forward, sniffing her hand. Approving, he sat down and arched his head toward her. Did that mean she could pet him? Hesitantly, Eri laid a hand on his fur. He pushed his head further into her hand, giving her an impatient bark. Excited now, she petted him. His fur was softer than she'd expected. There was a rumbling sound, almost like purring, and when she glanced at his face, there was something like a contented smile on his face.

"Eri."

At the sound of her brothers, Bakugou dashed to the other side of the kitchen and watched them warily. She looked up to find Mirio and Izuku standing at the kitchen entrance, their eyes wide.

"Eri, you're smiling," Mirio whispered.

She patted her mouth. Her lips were up and oh, she was smiling. Before she could say anything, four sets of arms were around her, bodies colliding as both her brothers hugged her.

"I was worried you'd never smile," Izuku mumbled, crying.

"I'm so glad." Mirio kissed the side of her head.

Eri couldn't help it—surrounded by all this love, she broke into tears and clung to them. "I'm sorry, it's all my fault—"

"It's not!" Izuku snapped. "Nothing is."

"But Mom and Dad—"

"You're fine, Eri, don't blame yourself."

"And that guy—"

Mirio pulled back and wiped her tears with his thumb. "It'll be fine. I can deal with him. Don't worry about it."

Bakugou growled and Eri glanced at him. Gathering her courage, she asked, "C-can he stay?"

"Him?" Mirio stared at him for a long moment before bursting into a smile. "Sure, but we're going to have to housetrain him." He gestured at the room. "Can't have this happen again, right?"

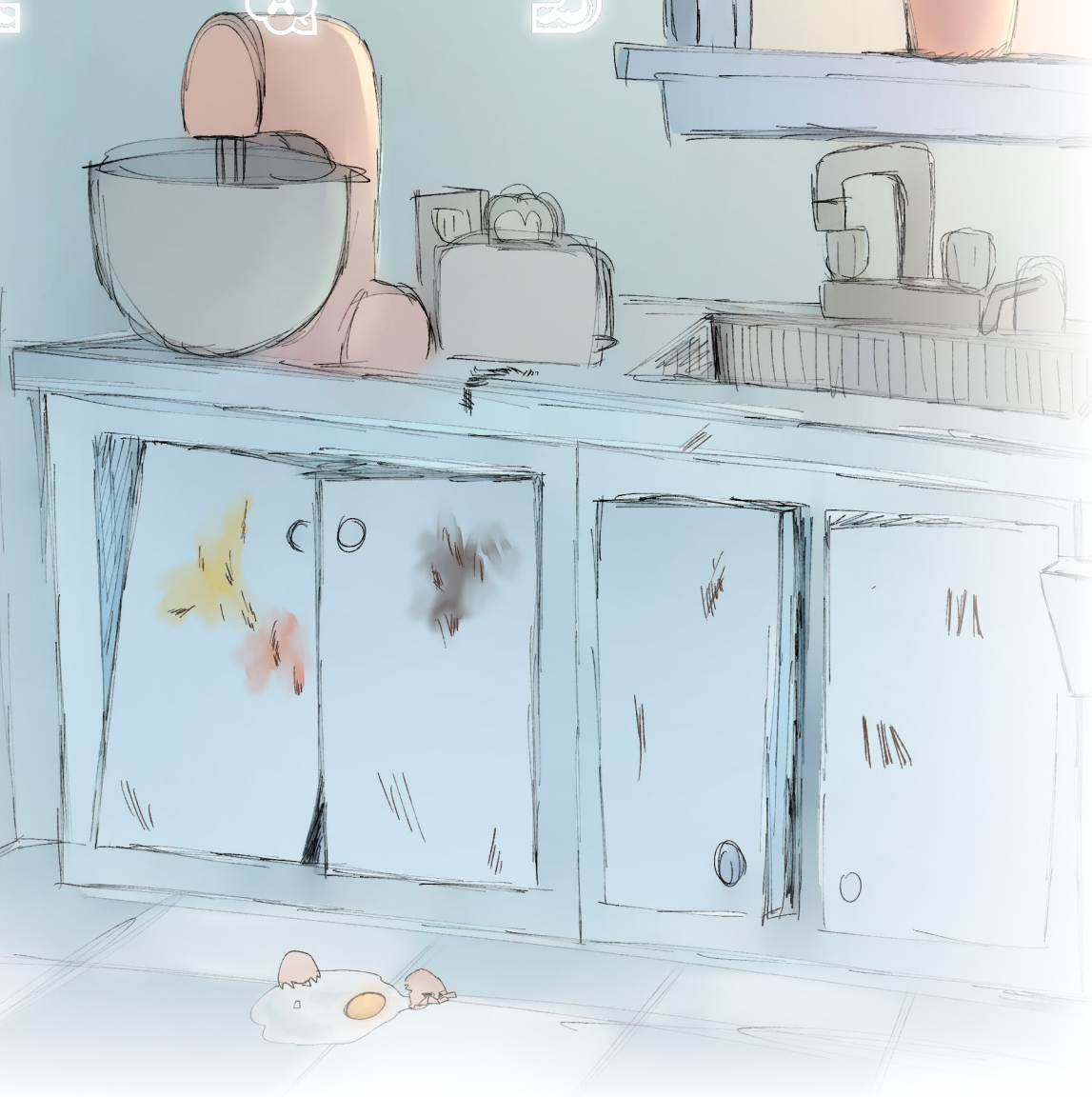
Eri nodded vigorously. "Y-yes. I'll teach him, I will! He can be good."

"What is he?" Izuku asked, taking a photo with his phone. He started to scroll through the internet, mumbling under his breath about different breeds of dogs and cats.

A *monster*, Eri knew, but she kept silent. Whatever he was, he was going to be family now.



She patted her mouth.  
Her lips were up and  
*oh,*  
she was smiling.





Heekhayl









# City Lights and Loving Nights

A Lady & the Tramp AU by Otaco

Mina's "parents" didn't love her.

She'd come to the conclusion *years* ago when the older kids at the orphanage explained to her what 'Yagi's Children's Home' really was. Mina's parents didn't love her, and gave her away like every other kid in the home.

Mina's *dads* however, loved her very, very much. They chose *her* at age eight, even when there were plenty of babies to choose from. They chose her and brought her home and finally showed Mina what a *family* was. It was weird at first, being hugged and held and doted on like a queen, but Mina soon realized it was because Mr. Shota and Mr. Hizashi (now dad and papa respectively) *loved her*.

Ten years later, they still loved her and cared for her, and Mina had long since shed that feeling of surrealness and had come to realize that this was normal. Family is *normal*.



Mina's dads *loved* her—they just happened to be... some of the most unpredictable men in the world. She remembered vividly the time Shota came home, arms full with a box kittens, and demanded of Hizashi that they keep them. Mina thought it was endearing—the way Shota had a soft spot for all things "stray." Maybe that was what made him such a good teacher—he saw potential in his students and made sure all of them succeeded. Of course, he wasn't as kind as Hizashi was most of the time, and he would periodically come home and slam his head tiredly into the doorframe.

Such things happened as a high school ethics teacher.

Hizashi was tamer than Shota was when it came to being caustic, but what he lacked in sarcasm, he made up for in how *loud* he was and how bright he always looked. That was one of the things Mina loved about him—he was so *bright*. He always wore this garish red shirt and black leather jacket and white pants that did *not* match his green eyes or long blonde hair, but he said it made him stand out. So he kept wearing it to work at the radio station every day.

Between the two men, the spontaneity of the house was at a constant high, though Mina had supposed that the kittens were the most over the top incarnation of their mesh of personalities.

Mina was wrong.



"Mina, we're home!" Hizashi's loud voice boomed throughout the house, bouncing off the white painted walls. There was some rustling, the sound of footsteps on the freshly waxed wooden staircase, then Papa was pushing her door open just enough that when he peaked in she could see his leather jacket and the flash of his orange sunglasses.

"Hey, Pa." She mumbled, burrowing deeper into the comforters. It was far too early for this.

Hizashi and Shota had left her with tired kisses on her forehead at the dark hour of five thirty in the morning—the action so muddled by fatigue and sleepiness that Mina barely remembered it. Now, at eight thirty, they were back home, and although Mina was tired...

She wanted to know what was so important that they had woken up at five in the morning.

"Mina, can you sit up for a moment? We need to talk about something."

She immediately didn't like how quiet he was. Something sticky and heavy trickled from Mina's ribcage all the way down to her stomach where it vibrated and hummed with nervous energy. Begrudgingly, she pushed herself up and swiped bubblegum pink hair from her face.

"What's wrong?" She asked, hating how her voice shook.

"A few weeks ago, your father got a new transfer student in his class," Hizashi started, reaching out and tucking more hair behind Mina's ear. From here, she could see how tired he looked, "His name is Hitoshi Shinsou, and he used to be a part of the foster care system."

Mina raised an eyebrow. If he was going where she thought he was with this...

"Hitoshi ended up in a bad home—just recently because of the switch, everywhere else he was had been fine—and he wasn't being taken care of in the way he was supposed to. It wasn't anybody's fault just... a bad situation." Hizashi's throat bobbed, and Mina noticed how his voice trembled—with anger or sadness she couldn't tell. "So, Shota and I decided that we needed to help Hitoshi."

*Oh.*

*Oh no.*

"Wait so are you saying..." Mina breathed. Her body felt on fire. This *had* to be a dream. Her dads found someone... *new* to love? She... she wasn't—

"Mina, honey, calm down," Hizashi must have sensed her panic, because he grabbed her delicate hands in his larger ones, "We wanted to tell you sooner, *please* believe me, but things got desperate and it all went faster than it did when we got you—"

Mina couldn't help but swallow over a lump in her throat. They were just comparing them already? She had never *met* Hitoshi, and already the thought of him



made her want to grab her fluffy pink pillows and throw them so hard she broke something.

She couldn't believe that... just like that... she was being given up on, *again*.

"Honey, I want you to remember that we love you *very, very* much. Do you understand me?" Hizashi's voice called her back into reality like a plunge into icy, dark water. His soft hands traveled to her chin and steadied their gazes. "Mina. Talk to me. What's on your mind."

Words felt sour in Mina's throat. She wanted to scream, to fight, to kick, to yell, to *run*. For *ten years* it was just her, and Hizashi, and Shota and *now*—

Now, there was Hitoshi.

Hitoshi, who wormed his way into their life in just a few short weeks.

"It's fine. I'm fine. I understand." She forced out, blinking to hide the tears that sprang to her eyes.

"We'll make it work, Mina. We love you so much. Don't forget that."



Hitoshi was nice. He was quiet, but nice.

When Mina came down to meet him—after having time to fix her makeup and attire—he looked up and waved hesitantly. His purple head of hair was practically buried into Shota's gray scarf, and the dark-haired man had a protective arm around him.

Mina felt sick.

"Hitoshi, this is our daughter, Mina. Mina, this is Hitoshi."

"Hey." Mina smiled and waved, but she felt like she was moving in water.

There was no way this was *real*.

Mina clomped heavily down the stairs, not caring that she made a noise like thunder. Hizashi was worse anyway. She thundered down the carpet, only looking back at Shinsou when she reached the bottom with a loud *thunk* and watched him wince at the sound.

Oh. So maybe she did care a *little*.

"Hitoshi is... going to be staying with us. He's your... brother." Shota nodded towards Mina, dark eyes a stormy sea of emotion that the young girl couldn't decipher. "He's just a little bit younger than you, he's a sophomore. I'm sure you've seen him around school."

Mina hadn't. She tended to hang around with the other seniors in the upperclassman areas.

"Well it's uhm... nice to meet you!" Mina plastered on a sickly-sweet voice. "I'm super excited to get to know you!"

Shota's watchful eyes hung on her for a second. Did he know how bitter the lie tasted on her tongue?

"Mina, do you want to help Hitoshi set up his room?" Hizashi asked, attempting to cut the tense atmosphere of the sitting room.

"Sure!" She chirped, reaching down to grab a ratty purple backpack. Her fingers had just barely brushed it when the younger boy had lunged for it, tearing out of Shota's arms with such a haste to grab for it that it had the usually stoic man surprised.

"Are you alright, Hitoshi?" Aizawa asked, concern lacing his voice as he stood up to help the teen.

Mina's eyes burned with unshed tears as she grabbed the other duffel bag and pillow, letting Hitoshi adjust his backpack and grab a fluffy blanket from the couch arm.

"First door on the right." Shota told Mina, and she nodded without looking, "Oh, and uh, Mina, Shinsou is allergic to rodents, so we put some mouse traps in the corners. Be careful."

Mina wasn't really paying attention.

"Alright, it's this one!" She fixed her smile back on her face so wide it physically hurt. She bumped the old guest room door open with her hip and dropped Hitoshi's bags on the bed. "You can decorate it however you like, and if I know anything about Pa, he'll definitely want to take you shopping for decorations."

"Decorations?" Hitoshi mumbled looking around the room, "But there's already furniture?"

"Not furniture, silly!" Mina laughed, trying to lighten the mood. With one hand she unzipped Hitoshi's duffel and with the other she flicked on his lights. "Decorations! Posters, figures, ya know? Pa is like that."

"...Pa?" Hitoshi asked again, tired eyes wide like saucers.

Mina understood almost immediately. "Oh! Ah, Hizashi is Pa, and Shota is Dad. I kinda ended up naming them a few years after I was adopted. It was an accident at first, but then it stuck! You don't have to call them that though."

A little piece of Mina hoped he didn't. That was *her* thing.

"Oh, uh thanks," Hitoshi shrugged, and Mina watched as the tiniest hint of a smile pulled at his lips, "Thank you for uh... being so nice. I'm sorry for going crazy over the backpack. It's a force of habit."

The tension in Mina's shoulders slowly began to release, "It's alright! It wasn't that big of a deal." *Lie*. "I kinda get it. They're *your* things. You don't want someone to take them. I was like that too when I was younger. Put Pa and Dad through it

sometimes when cleanup time came."

Hitoshi chuckled and unzipped the backpack. On top were basic things: shirts, a video game console, some headphones, a stuffed cat. When he got to the bottom though, his hands shook some and he shifted uncomfortably before pulling out a few handfuls of energy bars and what she recognized to be Shota's energy packs.

"Uhm... do I have a drawer? I can put these in?" He looked at the older girl, and she watched the smile fall from his face almost as soon as it got there.

"Mmhmm!" She hummed, "We have a cabinet in the kitchen—"

"N-No, I mean... in here." He stammered out, face flushing red.

Mina faltered for a minute, "In here? Why would you need them in here? Food goes in the kitchen, silly."

Hitoshi didn't say anything. Mina's stomach churned, and she wished she could erase the past conversation entirely and start over.

"We aren't going to take it from you, if that's what you're wondering." She mumbled, putting some of Hitoshi's socks in a drawer. "And you'll get three meals a day... *minimum*. Pa can get kinda anal about snacks though, so expect to be fed one of his weird creations."

Hitoshi smiled at that, and Mina felt like she had won a marathon.



"I... I just don't *know*, Denki! He's nice and all but like... ugh! It's so confusing!"

"Stop whining already, jeez." Katsuki rolled his burgundy eyes and slumped further into the tree stump he was leaning on, not looking up from his phone.

"Awh, hey, Bakubro, who ya texting, hmmm?" Denki bounced over, flamboyant yellow hair flapping against his jawline, "Is it *Eijiro*?"

"What? NO! Shut up dumbass!" Katsuki screeched, ducking to the side as Denki launched himself at his phone, reaching for it with nimble fingers.

"Who's Ejiro?" Mina squinted her eyes at Katsuki's orange phone which was *definitely* open to his text messages and she could *swear* she saw hearts.

"No one, bitch!" Katsuki howled, kicking Denki in the ribs just enough to where the other blonde fell on the ground and pointed an accusatory finger at the angry boy.

"Don't be mean Kacchan!" Denki scolded playfully, kicking a pebble at the ashy blonde, "Mina is having a dilemma! You have to be nice! Stop texting *Eijiro* and get off your phone!"

"It's not even that big of a deal! It's not like she's being abandoned!" Katsuki screeched back, thrusting an outstretched palm at the girl. Mina rolled her eyes at her two friends. Their "backyard hangouts" were the staple of normality for her,



and she had immediately sought out the two blonde boys down the street to ease her mind (which they weren't doing a very good job of).

"Might as well!" Mina threw her hands up in the air, "It's all *Hitoshi this, Hitoshi that*, 'Mina would you please go do this for Hitoshi?' It sucks!"

"Maybe they're just trying to make him feel welcome, dunce face." Katsuki threw the incriminating pebble back, before glaring at Mina from the outside of his eyes, "He was in foster care right? So obviously it wasn't working out if your dads adopted him, maybe he's like traumatized or somethin'."

"I think it'll work itself out, Meens," Denki slung a pale arm across her shoulders, "It's just transition right now, right? Give it a little bit and it'll be *fine*."

"How long do I give it?" Mina sighed, head flopping back onto Denki's white picket fence.

"*Eternity*."

Mina was expecting either Denki or Katsuki's voice to have made the sarcastic comment, but the male voice over her shoulder didn't belong to either boy, and the suddenness of it caused her to yelp and jump sideways into Katsuki's unsuspecting lap. The ashy blonde, surprisingly, didn't punch her, but he did shift so she rolled off of his lap into the fluffy green grass.

"Who the hell are you?" Katsuki hissed, and that's when Mina looked up at the intruder.

"Hanta Sero, pleased to meetcha."

Hanta was tall (*very* tall) with sun kissed skin and a triangle smile. He would have *maybe* been attractive, but he had this long black hair that brushed his shoulders in stringy curls and he had a *large* smile with giant teeth.

"Why are you here peeking into *my* backyard?" Denki squinted at the taller boy who shrugged in response.

"I heard a damsel in distress that needed my help."

Mina huffed, pushing herself and marching over to the white fence that separated her from the strange boy, "I'm not in distress, and I don't need your help." Who was this guy anyway?

"Mmhmm? Sure." Hanta rolled his eyes and smiled only wider at Mina, leaning over the fence to show just how much taller than her he really was, "Then how about... I'm just here to offer some advice."

"I don't want your—" Mina started, but was silenced by a slender finger pushing her lips together.

"When the second kid comes, the first one isn't the baby anymore. But you probably already knew that, right? I don't know what your ideal world looks like, but here's reality princess: baby always wins. The eldest is the first to go."

"What the hell? Get lost fucker." Katsuki growled, pulling Mina back by her shoulder and putting himself in between the two.

Hanta only shrugged, his smile never wavering, before walking off with a blasé wave over his shoulder.

"Creep." Katsuki huffed, turning back to Mina and Denki. "Don't listen to him."

Mina wanted to agree, but that same twisting feeling had settled in her stomach again.

"You alright Mina?" Denki asked, eyes holding a worry so uncharacteristic of the joyful boy.

"I think I'm just gonna go home."



"So... hi." Mina struggled to find the right words to say, instead focusing on picking at the sofa.

"Hey." Hitoshi responded, staring at Mina with the same tired purple eyes.

Mina heaved a sigh. *Here goes nothing.*

"Sorry if I've been kinda... standoffish," she choked out, "I just... it's been just me for a while now and so it's just... strange."

Hitoshi snorted and rubbed the back of his neck absentmindedly, "Tell me about it. I've been stuck in a house with six other kids before this."

Mina's eyes bugged out of her head, "Six?!"

Hitoshi laughed a little bit, the light sound filling his still empty room, "Yeah, six. Three girls and four boys in all. They were a handful. Made it hard to do... anything really. This is nice. I like the quiet. And you definitely aren't standoffish."

"Oh trust me, Papa is *not* quiet." Mina giggled, "I think he's been trying to tone it down recently, but he's one of the *worst* at volume control." She sighed, letting an easy smile relax over her face, "And thank you. It's just... going to take some time."

"Speaking of time," Shota came through the kitchen, a glare that said he was *very* pissed off rolling on his features, "I have to go to a conference out of town next weekend."

Mina knew that was his easy way of saying that both he *and* Hizashi would be going to the conference. Shota had a problem with traveling alone, and so any time he had to go somewhere, Hizashi went too, and Mina stayed behind to watch the house and see if Toto, the cat, would turn up in need of a meal.

Mina didn't mind much, she could stay at home alone just fine, but Hitoshi seemed to freeze up next to her like he had suddenly seen death itself. She figured Shota

had explained this to him already.

"Don't worry. Hizashi and I have talked and I have a cousin in town who says he can stay around to make sure you feel secure. He used to work in security, actually, so it might be nice for him to stay here. His name is Shigaraki. Mina, he was at the last family reunion—"

"Light blue hair? Split lips?" She quipped, raising an eyebrow. Frankly, the guy gave her the creeps, but she knew that Hitoshi needed an adult in the house, and it *wasn't* her by a long shot.

Hitoshi gaped beside her, eyes wide. "You just... interrupted him!?"

Mina shrugged, "Yup. He's fine with it."

"Not in class!" Hitoshi sounded absolutely scandalized, he pointed a slender finger at Shota who crossed his arms as if to say *'dare me.'* "Once I accidentally interrupted and he raked me across the coals!"

"My home and my classroom are two different places, Hitoshi." Shota yawned and slumped out of the sitting room, probably to lie down and nap with Hizashi.

"That's so unfair." Hitoshi groaned, tipping his head of purple hair back, "He shredded me for it!"



"Mina, Hitoshi, this is Shigaraki." Shota smiled thinly at his two kids, but Mina didn't feel like smiling back.

(That had been happening a lot lately).

Shigaraki looked like a hobo, which was saying something because so did Shota, and Mina was just fine with his beard and long hair. Shigaraki on the other hand... looked like a snake, and Mina wanted nothing more than to tell him where he could put that creepy smile of his.

"We'll be back on Sunday. If you need us, text us." Hizashi smiled, looping a thin arm around Shota's waist and with that they were gone and Shigaraki faced Mina and Hitoshi alone.

"Now, let's see here... You don't mind if a few friends crash too? I was letting them stay with me, but now since I'm here..." Shigaraki shrugged, scratching at a patch of red skin on his neck. The tone of voice he used dipped into a whisper that implied he wasn't going to take no for an answer.

Before Mina could answer, a blonde girl and a tall dark-haired man all but bust down their door, backpacks and six packs of beers in hand.

"Whoo, Shiggy! You ready to get this party started?!" The other man grinned like a maniac, showing off lines of stitches that ran along his jawline and on his cheekbones.



"Hell yeah!" The blonde girl grinned, jumping on Shigaraki's back and pulling a cigarette out of the pale man's pocket. With a flick of a lighter, it was ablaze.

Mina looked at Hitoshi.

"Movie in my room?"



"Hey! Pinky!" Dabi, the dark-haired man with the stitches, pounded on Mina's door at ten thirty at night. She groaned, shifting on her bed where she and Hitoshi had been watching some stupid rom com to avoid the racket that Shigaraki and his gang—Toga being the girl—had been making.

Hitoshi was now fast asleep, which was a feat in itself, considering Shota and Hizashi had told her he had pretty bad insomnia. Trying her best not to wake him, Mina opened her door to find the man peering down at her with a grin on his face akin to a fox hunting a rabbit. His fist was poised to pound again, and it made Mina take a step back.

"Shiggy went out to get us more booze, and Toga and I broke the TV. Something got unplugged and I dunno, I think we cracked the screen in one place. Go down and take a look at it. You live here, right?"

*Right. She did. And she was fifty shades of over Dabi and Toga's antics.*

With a sigh she shut her bedroom door so as to not wake Hitoshi and padded down the stairs to see the carnage that was her sitting room.

*Dad and Pa were going to kill her.*

The room was a *mess* to put it lightly. The TV didn't just have a little crack, but a crevice that spanned the whole flatscreen, and somehow the HDMI box had been unplugged and thrown halfway across the room. There was a beer stain on the couch, and countless bottles strewn around the room.

"Ay, Dabi, Toga, I'm back!" Shigaraki announced his presence awfully loudly by stomping in through the front door and slamming a bag of glass bottles on the kitchen counter. He took one look at the sitting room, and promptly *lost it*.

"What the *hell*? What happened here! I leave you two for *five minutes* and—" his sharp gaze landed on Mina, paused in front of the cracked TV, HDMI box in hand.

"Oh, it was *you*, you conniving little—"

"She flipped out on us as soon as you left!" Toga shrieked, high pitched voice echoing throughout the house, and Mina went *pale*. "Talking about how we were her servants or something!"

"Wanted a beer and we told her no, so the psycho bitch threw the box thing at the TV! She's insane, Shig!" Dabi jumped in, hissing at Mina like she was the plague.

No. No. No. No.

"How *dare* you!" Shigaraki roared, slamming a fist down on the counter so hard Mina heard a crack (bone or marble, she didn't know). "Are you *trying* to get me killed by your dad? He's gonna fuckin' *murder* me and it's all your fault!"

"I didn't—"

"Shut it! If I see your nasty head up pink hair again I'm gonna take this lighter and burn your stuff to ashes. Hear me? Clean this up and get out of my sight." Shigaraki hissed, stalking off to the back patio, Toga and Dabi in tow.

Mina felt the burn of tears in her nose and eyes, and this time, she couldn't stop them.

*This mess* wasn't her fault. She had nothing to do with this at all. No, this was all Shota and Hizashi and Hitoshi's fault. They just had to come in and *change* things and now it was Mina's fault?

With hot tears cutting her cheeks, Mina fled upstairs and grabbed the first bag she saw—a little fashion backpack—and shoved her phone, charger, and a random shirt she had in her closet.

"M-Mina? What's happening?" Hitoshi mumbled, sitting up from the pile of blankets on her bed.

"I'm out." She spat, zipping the bag closed and shoving her feet into her shoes. "I can't take it anymore. I put up with it, and I tried to follow the rules, and nobody even cared, so I'm *done*. Have fun Hitoshi. See you *never*." The line was cringe-worthy in her head but she was *seething* and her brain couldn't think of anything better to say.

"W-What? You're leaving?" Hitoshi scrambled out of bed, "Just like that? What happened?"

Mina didn't answer except for a slam of her door and the stomping of her tennis shoes as she left the house without looking back.



It was colder than Mina had expected.

The spring sun warmed the sidewalks in the daytime, but when the moon rose, everything suddenly became frigid and cold and *dark*.

Mina wanted to go home.

A little part of her felt guilty about leaving Shinsou there alone. Scratch that, not little, but *big*. She hated that she left him alone to handle Shigaraki's neglect until Hizashi and Shouta came home.

Oh.

She scrambled with numbing fingers to grab her phone from her pocket and felt herself pale when she saw how many missed calls and texts she had.

*Dad and Pa.*

Boiling guilt settled in her throat and she struggled to stop another onslaught of tears.

*Mina, where are you?*

*Mina.*

*Mina answer your phone.*

*MINA.*

*Please call us. We're worried.*

"You know... it's a little late for you to be out here alone, huh, pinky?"

Mina kept walking. Just ignore them and they'll go away.

"Hey, pinky! Stop and chat!"

Mina turned her head to meet the source of the man—a blonde with side swept hair and a lazy grin on his face. Next to him was a shorter, stockier lackey with his hands shoved into purple pockets that matched poorly dyed purple hair

"Leave me alone." She spat, forcing as much venom into her words to cover the way her voice shook with uncertainty.

It was late. No one knew where she was. Shouta and Hizashi were out of town.

"Awh, come on! We aren't gonna hurt you or anything! You just look kinda... lost out here this late. A pretty girl like you should—"

"She said to leave her alone, dipwads." A hot breath rippled down Mina's spine and the pinkette jumped, whipping around with an arm outstretched to fight the new offender, but then paused at the awfully familiar greasy hair and triangular smile.

"Sero?" She whispered, and the boy grinned down at her proudly.

"Would you look at that, the little lady remembered my name!" He laughed, then hardened his features. "Now, unless any of you are looking to pick a fight, I would suggest leaving this kind young lady alone. Isn't it past your bedtime?"

"Shut up, man. We were just tryin' to have some fun." The shorter man scoffed, "But if you want her you can have her. She's an ugly cow anyway."

Mina's mouth fell open and she felt her ears burn. Sero grunted beside her then





he was shoving her back a few paces and stepping in front of the men. While he at once seemed lax, now he held a feral energy. He was like a rabid dog with a smile overtaking his triangular face and replacing his smile in a contorted sneer.

"I suggest you back up, or we can make this *really* ugly." Sero hissed. The blonde's eyes widened just a fraction, and he stumbled back just a step.

"Whatever. You aren't work my time you pathetic grease bag." He rolled his eyes, "Go take a shower."

Mina could Sero stiffened and then relaxed with a huff. With a turn of his heel he stalked back to Mina and grabbed her wrist, dragging her away from the duo.

"What was that?" She asked, feeling like she was caught in a whirlwind. Sero glanced back at her, smirk back on his face, a dark eyebrow raised in mock confusion.

"What do you mean? I saved your little lady ass." He snorted, letting go of her wrist.

"No I mean," Mina struggled for words. This boy... What on Earth was he playing at? "The other morning you all but trashed talked me and now you threatened to fight a guy because he made an offhanded comment. Excuse me for feeling confused."

Sero shrugged, "Well m'lady, what I said that day is still true. Wasn't meant as an insult—it's just a statement of fact."

"Well it's a stupid fact." Mina rolled her eyes and crossed her arms across her chest defensively. "So what now? You can go or whatever. I'm fine now."

Sero gasped, placing a hand on his chest in fake offense, "And leave m'lady out here alone to struggle? No way, Jose! It's the middle of the night, no woman should be out alone!"

Mina glared at him. "Don't joke about it. And don't call me 'm'lady' she huffed, a piece of bubblegum pink hair fluttering in the air from her breath. Her stomach growled, and she wished she had brought food with her.

"You hungry?" Sero asked, all signs of mirth falling from his face. This was genuine Sero, it seemed. This was a boy who was just asking an innocent question.

"A little."

"Well, m'lady, I know a fantastic place to eat. And it's free!" He smiled broadly and with long strides stepped just in front of Mina to lead the way. The girl had no choice but to follow. Her stomach was stronger than her mind. "Ya know actually, m'lady is just too long. I've gotta call you something else."

"Mina is fine."

"Ooh! I can just call you Lady!" Sero ignored her entirely, running a thin hand through his long black hair. "Well, Lady, it's dinner time!"

Mina rolled her eyes, but didn't stop herself from smiling at Sero's energy. It was pleasant after her long night.



"Taishiro's?" Mina's eyes widened as she looked at the sign. "I thought you said this was free?" She looked over at Sero skeptically.

"It is!" The boy waved a dismissive hand, "Just follow my lead. The guy who works here owes me a favor."

"But... this place is expensive!" Mina protested. Sero shrugged with a noncommittal grunt and led her around the building to the dark back alleyway. If Mina wasn't already having a rough night, she would be scared of going back here, but her nerves were shot to Hell, and Sero was there anyways just in case.

There was a metal door on the side of the building. It was rusted and worn and looked like something straight out of a horror movie, but Sero wasn't deterred in the slightest. Mina hung back as he knocked on the door. She *really* hoped this wasn't a setup. The last thing she needed was to get into trouble when she already *wasn't* supposed to be out here.

Her mind wandered to Hitoshi—all alone in that house—and she felt sick. She pushed the thought from her mind. He would be fine. Shigaraki didn't care anyway.

The door opened with a light creak, and light flooded the alley. Mina stiffened. If she had to run, now would be the time—

"Sero!" A tall man with blue, unruly hair gasped quietly, "It's good to see you alive and well!"

"All in a day's work, Tamaki!" The lanky boy laughed and rubbed the back of his neck charmingly. He may be blunt and coy, but he knew how to hold himself in conversation. Mina could give him that much. "Is Fat here?"

*Fat?*

"Yeah, you hungry?" The quiet boy asked, stepping back inside when Sero nodded. "Hey, Fat Gum! Sero's here!"

*Who was Fat Gum?*

Mina's curiosity was quelled in an instant when a larger man stepped into the light, nearly obscuring it with his height and size. She instantly recognized him as Taishiro, the owner of the restaurant. She wondered where the name *Fat Gum* had some from. She'd have to ask Sero.

"Sero! You didn't tell me you were gonna drop by!" He cheered, opening his arms wide. Sero was enveloped in a hug in mere seconds, nearly disappearing into Fat Gum's bulky arms.

"I hadn't planned on it actually, but I picked up a partner and we're hungry!" Sero

laughed, holding his hand out to Mina. She suddenly wanted to run even more than before. She had *not* asked to be thrown into a pit of vipers and exposed so quickly! Dad and Papa could *not* find out she was gone. "Fat, this is Mina! Mina, this is Taishiro, but we call him Fat Gum because he makes a *mean* chocolate cake that just *screams* gingivitis."

That may be the longest word that Sero had ever used.

Without any time for Mina to plan her great escape, Sero grabbed her arm and pulled her forward out of her shadow lurking and into the light. Her stomach twisted in anxiety.

"Mina? Wait a second... you're Shota and Hizashi's kid." Taishiro squinted. Mina shrunk under his glare. This was *not* supposed to happen. "Why are you out here at this hour of the night?"

"*Please* don't tell them," the words left Mina's mouth in a rush. Sero looked over to her with the slightest trace of a frown on his brow. "They don't need to know. *Please, please*, don't tell them that I'm here."

Taishiro paused and looked her up and down before sighing. "Alright," he conceded, though he didn't look happy about it, "but don't get into any trouble, you hear? Now wait one sec and I'll bring you something to eat, okay?" He disappeared with the shut of a metal door.

"Did you run away?" Sero wheeled on her as soon as the door shut. His pale face glowed in the dim moon lighting.

"I never said that," Mina deflected, "what gave you that idea?"

"Because if you had been kicked out, your parents would know where you were, Lady. I may look like a rat, but I've got the brains for this sorta stuff," he grinned. "Not that I care why you're here. We're a brotherhood—or, uh, sisterhood in your case I guess—now, Lady. I'm not gonna just *leave* you."

Mina felt her cheeks flush. "Thanks... I guess." She murmured. Looking at Sero though, another question nagged at the back of her mind, "Hey why—"

The door swung open and Fat Gum returned again, holding a takeout box and two forks. "We had an extra plate of Spaghetti tonight. You kids are free to share it." He smiled, "Stay safe. I mean it."

"Aye-aye captain!" Sero saluted and took the box. Mina just nodded politely and waved as Taishiro shut the door, leaving them back in the darkness.

"Want to sit?" Sero hummed as they returned back from the alley to the streetlamp lit main road. "There's some outdoor tables." Mina nodded. Her feed *did* ache, and sitting down sounded *awfully* good right about then. As she settled herself at a table, her hand instantly reached for her phone, but then paused. Did she *want* to see how many texts and calls she no doubt had?





No.

She didn't want to think about home at all.

She grabbed a fork and opened the box. The heavenly scent of spaghetti hit her almost instantly and he groaned in happiness.

"Good, right? Fat never disappoints." Sero chuckled, taking the other plastic fork and clinking it pitifully against Mina's. She laughed and flicked it away. Sero seemed so... carefree. She wanted to be like that. Emphasis on the *free* part.

"So, now that you know I'm a runaway," she tried to sound casual, but the words shook with their gravity, "Care to share why you're out here?"

Sero hummed through a mouthful of noodles. "Urhtpan" He slurred out, not bothering to cover his mouth as he tried to talk. Mina wrinkled her nose and he chuckled lightly. When he swallowed, he tried again. "Orphan." he said the word so casually it took Mina by surprise.

"You— how—" she breathed and Sero shrugged, still smiling like it was nothing.

"I've been on my own for a few years now. It isn't too bad. Fat Gum takes pity on me and gives me food once every two weeks. I usually save it, but tonight I'll let you take my second share." Mina's face heated up as she delicately slurped her noodles. "Anyway, yeah, parents died a while back. It sucked, but honestly it isn't like they cared much anyway." He sighed and took another bite of spaghetti. Mina followed suit, trying to fill the uncomfortable tension.

Her longest strand still hung back on the plate, and she found that it must have been stuck under a mound of spaghetti because the more she tried to eat, the more tension it seemed there was.

Her eyes flicked up to Sero, hoping to convey her awkwardness, but she realized they were strangely close.

Nose to nose close.

Once glance told her that her spaghetti strand coincidentally happened to be not on the plate, but in Sero's mouth as well.

They stared at each other quietly, neither daring to move.

This close, Mina could see how dark and deep Sero's eyes were and how his hair cast shadows on his face that made his eyelashes long and full. His nose had a steep slope down that made him look Roman. His lips really did look triangular. She could feel his warm breath on her face.

They were so... *close*.

The spaghetti strand snapped, and like a trance, Mina found herself settling back into her chair. Her heart pounded. Sero's grin had fallen off his face and his eyes were wide.



He cleared his throat and stood up, offering her his hand, "You ready? There's somewhere else I want to show you."

This time, Mina followed her heart over her mind.



"Here we are! Home sweet home!" Sero cheered, gesturing with wide open arms at the scenery around them.

"Sero... this is an abandoned train station."

"That's what *you* say," Sero smiled at her, perfect teeth glowing in the dim light, "but *I* say that this place beats the Ritz. Now, m'lady, right this way." He grabbed her hand and pulled her around a brick wall, and suddenly the dark train station was illuminated in a soft golden glow.

"Woah..." Mina breathed, letting her eyes roam around the space. Sero, it seemed, had hung up lanterns and fairy lights and hung up old colorful tapestries and blankets to make a sort of tent. Pillows and statues and figurines and everything decorated the floor, and three hammocks were strung from metal beams. "Did you do all this?"

Sero laughed and shook his head, "me? Nah, this was all Jiro. She likes cozy things."

"Jiro?"

Sero nodded, guiding Mina to the nest of pillows on the ground and flopping down on some. "Yeah. She's probably around here somewhere. She's like me. We met a while back—oh, Kiri too. He should be here too, actually. Anyway, we all kinda banded together to... survive." The implication of the words sat heavy on Mina's heart, but she forced herself to nod. She felt strangely guilty again, wondering about what Pa and Dad would do if she died. She squashed down the feeling firmly.

"Sero! My man!" A head of flaming red hair screamed around the corner, skidding to a halt and almost tripping on a loose rug, "You're back! And you... you brought a girl?"

"Kiri what in the hell are you yelling about *now*?" A deep woman's voice echoed on the metal and brick walls, and then a significantly shorter girl appeared behind Kiri. Her mouth fell open into a wide 'O' as she stared at Sero and Mina.

"Is this another stray?" Kiri bounced over and flopped down next to Sero, staring at Mina with a raised eyebrow and blinding smile. His teeth were naturally sharp and made him look like a puppy or some kind of baby shark. The way his face shone in the light revealed a faint pink scar above his eyelid. Although he spoke and acted like a kid, the detail made him look aged and wise beyond his years. Or maybe it was the looseness of his gait that made him feel like a sage behind his bubbly front.

Sero's signature grin faltered and for once in his look he looked lost as he looked at Mina.

"Uh..." she stumbled over her words. She thought of Pa and Dad and Hitoshi, and then paused, remembering Shigaraki and how *worthless* she had felt, and it's not like her dads would care anyway. They would blame her because Shigaraki would put up some front and Hitoshi was just *too perfect* and they already didn't ask her when it concerned *him* so why would they care now? "Yeah." She nodded, and Kirishima sucked in a breath through his teeth. Sero stared at her thoughtfully, smile lost on his lips.

"Sucks, man." He held out a hand, "But we're glad to have you here! I'm Eijiro Kirishima," he pointed at the girl who was busy relighting an oil lantern, "That's Kyoka Jiro, she's kinda like our one braincell. Keeps us all in check."

The name *Eijiro* struck a chord in Kyoka's mind and she struggled to put a pin on it. *Eijiro... Eijiro.*

*Bakugou's Eijiro.*

"I-I'm Mina." She mumbled, dismissing the thought almost immediately as she thought it. There was no way they were the same person. "I ah— ran away from home." It still felt surreal so voice out loud.

"In my experience," Jiro ambled over, passing Mina a cold water bottle that came from who knows where. Mina accepted it thankfully and enjoyed the cool liquid on her throat, "it helps to talk about it. For example, my parents kicked me out because my dad was having an affair and I called him out on it. Sucked a lot—still does—but it hurts less now."

Mina's words died on her lips, and she felt shame bubble up inside of her. She felt so... stupid with her menial problems and prissy lifestyle, and Kyoka and Eijiro were so *nice* she couldn't just downplay them like that.

"You good, lady?" Sero nudged her shoulder and she snapped out of her mini-trance. His dark eyes raked over her face, and Mina felt her skin flush under his scrutinization.

"Yeah. I'm fine." She nodded, voice quiet, "Uhm... my parents... well, I'm adopted." She shrugged and brought her hand up to fiddle with her earlobe in nervous anxiety, "And my dad—he's a teacher—knows this other kid who is... he was having a tough time, so they took him in too. They're really nice like that. They're... really good parents." Her voice caught in her throat, and she rubbed her nose to will away the clear onslaught of tears on their way, "But... they didn't even *tell* me until he was there, ya know? They apologized and said everything moved really fast, but it still sucked that I'm their kid too. I was there first, don't I deserve to know?"

"Anyway, they went on a business trip together this weekend. They only left this morning, which says a lot about how quickly things went to shit. Hitoshi—that's my...brother's name—he can't stay home "alone" yet so my dad's cousin came in to watch us but... he's... he's an *ass*." Mina felt the dam inevitably breaking. Her voice



cracked and she felt the first angry, heartbroken tear slip down her face, “and he brought his two friends along and they... they *destroyed* my house and *I’m* the one to blame!” She sobbed, throwing an angry hand up to the sky, “so I left! I’m not letting him... I’m not letting him *own* me like that!”

“Mina...” Sero muttered. The pinkette felt his hand stir beside her, but then Eijiro was pulling her into a bone crushing hug and she felt the wind be forced out of her lungs.

“Actual jerk.” The redhead mumbled, letting her go, “He’s a piece of trash for that. What about your brother? Is he okay?”

“I... I don’t know.” Mina sighed, slumping over and rubbing tiredly at her temples. “Hey... Hanta— Sero?”

The boy hummed in acknowledgement, shifting closer to her.

“I... I want to go home.” She croaked. The gaping hole in her chest she had been trying so hard to ignore could not be repaired. Being out in the night with Sero was exhilarating—the best feeling of her life—but home was... just that. Home.

Sero seemed to stiffen next to her, then placed a solid hand on her back and guided her up to her feet. “As you wish, m’lady,” he promised with his warm grin, and together they returned to the night.



“It’s just down this road here.” Sero hummed, hands crammed in his pockets. He squinted at the horizon, and nudged Mina’s elbow with his own. “Lookie there—sun’ll come up before long.”

Mina also noticed that it was dawning on four in the morning and indeed the sky didn’t look as murky and deep as it had before, but the roads were still only visible in the light of the streetlamps, and her body didn’t feel tired at all. Anxiety clawed its way through her nerves and rattled her to her core. She nodded, but didn’t offer up an answer. Her stomach turned over too uncomfortably for that.

Sero glanced over at her, then nudged her elbow again. “Hey, don’t look so down. We’ll be back home before you know it.” He pointed off to the side, “Hey, look! There’s even a cat we can pet! Cats make everything better.” Without waiting for Mina to respond, he trotted off towards a metal trashcan outside a video game shop to poke around at a black cat.

Mina started over, not wanting to be left alone (and also kinda wanting to pet the little furball), when blue and red lights illuminated the street and the sounds of sirens screamed to life and bounced off the walls.

*Just blend in. They don’t need to know you’re a runaway. Besides, they probably aren’t even looking for you—*

“Excuse me ma’am,” Mina jumped at the police officer’s voice appearance over her

shoulder, "is your name Mina Aizawa?"

Mina froze, and out of the corner of her eye she could see Sero stiffen and rise to his feet slowly.

"Y-Yes." She gulped, sweat beginning to bead on her palms.

"We received a report that you had gone missing from your guardian... Shigaraki?" The officer continued, and Mina felt much sicker than before, "We're here to take you home."

"Wait—" Mina started, but her protests were in vain. The officer placed a heavy hand on her shoulder and guided her to the police car. She caught Sero's wide eyes as she was placed inside the vehicle—wide, guilty—and wanted nothing more than to be by his side than on her way to what would be the worst day of her life.



Hanta Sero didn't regret much.

Living on the streets meant he lived a free lifestyle. People came and went and his actions were just actions in the see of bustling life.

Then, Hanta met Mina, and he knew exactly what regret was.

Regret was watching someone so precious to you be torn away from you because you were careless. Regret is saying goodbye too early.

And Hanta Sero... did not want to regret anything about that night.

"It's this house... right?" He mumbled to himself, stepping through the picturesque whitewashed picket fence that *screamed* money and a happy family. He cringed at the irony of it all.

"What're you doing with your life?" He sighed, walking through perfectly cut green grass to the back of the house. Every window was wide open, but Hanta couldn't make out anything that would define it as 'Mina's Room' in any of them. Two windows—the ones that faced the backyard—were shuttered closed. The teen fingered the pebbles in his pockets. He would start there.

One perfectly placed shot after another, the dark-haired boy lobbed the tiny stones against the shutters. He overshot on one, however, and it came bouncing back down on his head unsatisfactorily.

"Damn." He cursed, bending down to pick it up. He stood up to throw it again when the window he had been assaulting was thrown wide open, and a messy purple haired teen appeared.

"Can I *help* you?" The younger boy sneered, and Hanta took a step back, confused. Who was this? Was this not Mina's house?

It connected in an instant.

"You're... Hitoshi, right?" Hanta inquired. Hitoshi nodded slowly, still glaring down at Hanta expectantly.

"Why are you here?"

"Is Mina there?" Sero cut to the choice, and Hitoshi seemed to scowl deeper.

"Why do you wanna know?"

"I-" Sero didn't know what to say, "I helped her out... last night that is. We're... friends?"

Hitoshi rolled his eyes at the unfortunate floundering. "Weirdo. She's here, but she can't talk to you. Shig's got her locked in her room until our parents get back."

Sero blinked and saw red, but steeled himself. "Help me climb up... will you?" Hitoshi shrugged, and moved to allow Hanta space to climb the side of the wooden house. He placed one foot on a small bush when he heard Mina scream.

His foot fell through the shrubbery, and his world stopped.



Mina thought the whole situation was poetic, in some screwed-up sort of way.

Shigaraki had quarantined her in her room the second she had stepped back in the house, and Mina was able to do nothing but take the punishment and crawl under her covers all day. Dad and Pa would be back soon, and then she could relax and get Shigaraki out of her house and life.

However, she knew impending peace was too much to ask, especially when she saw a dart of black out of the corner of her eyes. The shadow had slipped under her desk, leaving Mina to peel herself from her bed and creep timidly over to where it had disappeared.

That's when Mina came face to face with the fattest rat she had ever seen in her *existence* (which wasn't saying much, considering she had never seen a rat like this period). The creature poked its nose out from behind a stack of books, scaring Mina right out of her skin, and sending the girl diving to the other side of the room.

Her first instinct was to lunge for the door, but her realization hit her like a truck.

Hitoshi was allergic to rodents. Hitoshi couldn't be anywhere *near* this rat.

"Mina?!" Speak of the devil, Hitoshi was at her door, pounding on it frantically. "Mina, open up! What's wrong?!" Mina vaguely heard a crash from his room and then nearly paused when she heard a curse of 'shit!' that sounded like... Sero?

"Mina, open this door!" Hitoshi yelled, and Mina had to think fast. The rat continued to stare at her mockingly, unknowing and uncaring of her situation

"Uh... nothing's wrong!" She covered weakly, "I just... stubbed my toe!"

"I'm coming in!" Now that was *definitely* Sero, and he was outside her... window?

The shutters opened and then the lanky knight in shining armor was diving in like a sort of ninja.

"Sero?" Mina breathed.

*How... why... he...*

"Are you alright?" He asked, wide eyes darting over her body. He stepped forward in one long stride, hands on her shoulders as he searched for injuries. "Shigaraki didn't hurt you?"

Mina frowned, but seeing how frightened Sero looked, shook her head to calm him.

"No... uh..." She gestured to her desk with a nod of her head, "There's a uh... rat?"

Sero paused, then raised an eyebrow. "You wouldn't open your door because of a rat?"

"Hitoshi is allergic to rodents!" Mina informed him, "He can't come in here!"

Sero nodded, letting go of mina and grabbing her jewelry box from her dresser. "Hold tight. I've got it."

Mina watched as Sero dove for the rat. The little menace in question darted away, and the boy went after it with cat-like reflexes. In doing so, he trapped the creature in her box and shut it in tightly, but also full-body slammed her dresser, sending her glass cup of water to the ground with a tinkling crash. Both teens froze, and then Mina's door swung open, revealing a heaving Hitoshi and a furious Shigaraki.

"You... who *are* you?" The man hissed, pointing a shaking finger at Sero who froze in place. "Actually... never mind. I hear my... *ward* scream and find you in her room unannounced. You're under arrest." His gravelly voice accused.

"Wait—" Mina started, but Shigaraki held up a finger and grabbed his phone from his pocket.

"Not another word out of you. You've done enough." Shigaraki spat, venom in his words.

"What's all this *noise*?"

Mina had never been happier to hear Shota Aizawa's voice in her life.

"Dad!" Hitoshi yelled, ducking around Shigaraki and running to the two men approaching the scene.

"Shigaraki—" Hizashi started, then looked at Sero with a raised eyebrow. "Who are you?"

"A friend!" Mina interjected before Shigaraki could say another word. "He's a friend



and he was helping me get a rat out of my room so Hitoshi wouldn't get sick."

"He's an intruder! This room was locked—" Shigaraki blustered out a protest.

"Why was the room locked?" Aizawa asked, voice dropping to a deep, angry octave.

"Because she needed to be punished—"

"No!" Sero interrupted this time, startling everyone in the household. Keeping his grip on the jewelry box, he stepped forward. "Mina didn't do anything wrong. Shigaraki was treating her unfairly and... and... *wrong*, so she left to get away from him. You can't blame her for that! You can't blame her when you caused this!" The angry teen seethed at Shigaraki.

"Is that why my TV is broken?" Hizashi mused, but while he seemed amused by the situation, Shouta did not.

"Shigaraki... I am giving you five seconds to get out of my house and never come back. Do you understand me?" The older man growled.

"I can explain—"

"No, that's fine!" Hizashi interrupted, his bright smile looking suddenly more sinister, "Hitoshi explained everything to us on the phone last night. You can go now."

Shigaraki looked ready to protest, but one glare from Aizawa and he was darting out of the house.

"I'll handle that." Hizashi accepted the jewelry box from Sero, leaving Hitoshi, Mina, and Shouta, and the boy alone in the young girl's room.

There was a beat of stiff silence, and then, "What were you thinking?" Shouta breathed, wrapping Mina into a bone-crushing hug.

"I'm sorry." Mina sighed into the familiar chest. Tears pricked at her eyes and teemed over slowly, "I'm so sorry."

"I'm glad you're safe." Hizashi returned to the room, looking infinitely tired, "you could've died out there. We got back as soon as we could because you wouldn't answer us."

"I was safe." Mina promised, "I had Sero."

"Well, young man, thank you for protecting our girl." Hizashi extended a hand to the boy in question who took it proudly. "Do you need a ride home?"

There was a painful silence in the air, then Sero cleared his throat. "No, uhm, I'm alright. I'm... I don't exactly have a home."

Shouta nodded sagely, "Ah." he hummed, "So, you need a place to stay? We have an extra room—"

Sero, surprisingly enough to Mina (who still felt very much like she was in a whirl-

wind), shook his head. "Thank you sir, but I intend to earn my way."

"If that's the case..." Mic put a finger on his chin like he was deep in thought, "then I have an opening for a paid internship where I work. Would you be interested in that?"

Sero smiled at Mina, his big toothy grin shining in the sunlight.

"I'd be happy to."

And Mina knew that Sero wouldn't leave her side again.

"Well, I'll be gone then." He nodded to Hitoshi, and the two adults, then crossed the room to Mina, "I'll see you around... m'lady." He smiled.

Mina wrinkled her nose and swatted his arm, but couldn't stop the stupid grin from breaking across her face.

Sero, however, could stop it, and did—replacing it with a kiss on the cheek and a deep red blush before ducking out of the house.

Hitoshi blinked, looking back and forth from Mina to Sero's empty space, "What was that?"



"And that's how we met!" Hanta laughed, lounging back on the plush couch. "Good story, right?"

"Suuuuuuure, dad." little Akira Sero groaned and made a gagging motion to her brother. "Whatever you say."

"I say it's entertaining!" Hizashi cheered, bringing a giant package around to set in front of the Christmas tree. "Your papa here is a hard worker!"

"That he is." Mina laughed, a hand resting on her pregnant belly fondly as she gazed at her husband. "And I wouldn't have it any other way."

"You all are gross." Hitoshi laughed, taking the other little Sero, Rintarou, off his lap and putting him on the ground "Rinny, go tell your parents they're gross."

"GROSS!" Rintarou yelled in his tiny voice as he wobbled to his family's side.

"Yeah, yeah." Hanta laughed, placing a peck on Mina's lips. "But not m'lady. Never m'lady."

Mina's parents didn't love her. But that didn't bother her, she decided. What did matter is that she had the happiest family in the world—her loving dads, Hitoshi, Hanta, and her own two kids. That was more than enough to show her what love truly was.









# Wonderlust

An *Alice in Wonderland* AU by ChiaRoseKuro

**wonderlust** / ˈwɒndəlʌst / *noun*.

1. a strong desire to travel *through one's subconscious*
2. ~~the stage in a relationship, or a phase in love, where one wonders if they are in lust or in love~~

*originated from German 'wandern', lit. "to hike", and 'lust', lit. "desire"*



Charity balls, as far as Katsuki's concerned, were created with death by boredom in mind.

He understands the *necessity* of them just fine—hero fights got messy, especially when the villain didn't have the presence of mind to surrender quietly, and the funding had to come from *somewhere* to keep them all from starving. He even understands the need to rope in complacent politicians and rich do-gooders so that the heroes could keep themselves off the streets, even if he doesn't much care for the principle behind it. *Someone* has to ensure everyone keeps fighting the good fight, or whatever it is.

But getting his cheeks pinched by some handsy old lady? All for a few hundred bucks to All Might's agency, when she could be—who the hell knows, pinching Deku's instead?!

"Oh my!" the old lady gasps, hands flinching back when the plate in Katsuki's hand cracks and ceramic shards fall to the floor. "Are you quite alright, young man?"

"*Never better*," Katsuki grits through clenched teeth, and rearranges his face into an approximation of a smile before he adds, "I'm gonna go get someone to clean this up, alright?"

"What a lovely young man," the delusional old bat sighs as Katsuki walks away, hands rhythmically clenching and unclenching by his sides. Just a few more moments, and he might've well blasted her off her feet—*literally*, at that.

Nobody else seems to be having trouble with the rich cronies they've snagged—Kirishima looks happy enough to wave his arms about, and he's fairly certain he can hear Mina's delighted laughter soaring above the crowd.

At least **someone's** enjoying themselves, Katsuki thinks, flagging down a waiter and relaying the incident with the broken dish in short, snappy words.

God, what he'd give to have a live fighting demonstration—maybe he could construe it as another way to raise more funds. People liked betting, right? And seeing how strong their sponsored heroes were, right??

Katsuki's just about to look for Aizawa in the crowd, plan half-formed and bloody scenarios racing through his mind, when he catches a flash of white in the crowd. Which isn't really *unusual*, in and of itself—there's a lot of people dressed in white, and he's fairly certain half of them have crumbs or other stains on their fancy suits and dresses now—but it'd looked like a...

*Tail*, Katsuki's mind supplies. *A fluffy, bouncy rabbit tail.*

Which—what?

Later on, Katsuki will say it'd been irritation spurring him on. He's no Iida, all fussy and uptight about the dress code, but *nobody* should be wearing fluffy, bouncy rabbit tails at some boring ball.

But it's curiosity and maybe—just *maybe*—a touch of amusement coursing through his veins as he heads for the exit, where that tail had bobbed out of...

And instead of a luxuriously decorated corridor, all pale creams and muted golds with chandeliers hanging from the ceilings and plush carpet underfoot, Katsuki walks right into a garden.

It makes no sense. There's only meant to be one entrance-exit from the ballroom, unless one happens to enjoy jumping down from three-storey-high balconies, and they're in the middle of Musutafu. How a *garden*—and a fairly *luscious* garden at that—happened to replace a perfectly serviceable corridor is quite possibly going to sprain his mind if he thinks about it for too long—

So, it's probably for the best that Katsuki spots another flash of white. It lingers for long enough that he catches sight of—yep, that's *definitely* a rabbit tail—and quite a fair bit of green. There's so much green, in fact, that it almost blends in with the foliage in this unusually green garden.

But it's the clunky red sneakers that almost make Katsuki cough up blood, because he only knows of one person who wears sneakers that stupid and attention-seeking.

*If this is all **Deku's** fault...*

"You get back here right this *second*, Deku!" Katsuki roars, hands crackling with small but potent explosions as he breaks into a dead run. It's hard to move in a restrictive suit, and there's a distant thought for his Pro Hero outfit in the cloakroom—wherever the cloakroom happens to be now—but Deku jumps with a squeak and races off into the undergrowth.

Katsuki almost thinks he hears Deku muttering something like *I'm late*, which makes no sense when he *should* be hamming it up at the charity ball, but the undergrowth is getting denser and Katsuki has to fight through clinging branches and leaves. They rip into his suit and drag across his face, leaving scratches and even a shallowly bleeding wound while depositing leaves and twigs in his hair, and he probably looks like some sort of deranged person when he bursts from the undergrowth.

"You're *dead* when I get my hands on you!" Katsuki screams, eyes darting around as his fingers twitch and spark with crackle-pops of his Quirk—

But then there's a sudden shove, a whispered *I'm so sorry Kacchan* and a yawning

hole, welcoming Katsuki into its pitch-black embrace.

In the moment before he gets swallowed whole, Katsuki twists in time to see Deku peering down at him. Oh, there's a little regret in his dumb doe eyes, and he's *definitely* wringing his hands like the apologetic ass he is—but there's also a strange little smile on his face and he's wearing something almost archaic in its style. Almost *Victorian*, even, beyond the rabbit ears flopped over his hair, and there are even honest-to-goodness *gloves* on his hands when he twinkles them at Katsuki.

"It might help if you close your eyes!" is the last thing Katsuki hears out of Deku's smarmy, grinning lips.

And before Katsuki can hurl abuse back at him—the outside world falls away, and the hole closes in on him.



Falling, Katsuki quickly discovers, is *incredibly* boring. Without his Quirk to propel him upwards—he'd tried igniting his palms, but that'd resulted in a face full of sweat and nothing else to show from it—it's taking every bit of willpower to stay awake in this never-ending hole, let alone keep his eyes open.

Because, honestly, *screw* Deku and his advice. Like he was going to turn into paste while he was *closing his eyes* like a brainless *extra*.

There's nothing but darkness above and below him, which is both weird and concerning. The shelves lining the walls had been interesting at first, if only because he's fairly certain he'd spotted All Might memorabilia among all the random trash crammed behind their doors, but after a while...

*The hell is this all gonna end?* Katsuki thinks some minutes later, glaring at a particularly blinding grin from a floating All Might bobblehead, and almost misses the ground hurtling towards him.

*Almost*, because the story would come to an end if he ended up splattering against the ground.

As it is, his palms almost don't ignite in time to save him from a stick up the ass. It takes a backflip, some wild cursing and the incineration of quite a few twigs—because someone had decided to set up a pile of *twigs* atop a goddamn *boulder* at the bottom of a hole, what the *hell*—but Katsuki manages to land on his feet in a flutter of lace.

A flutter of lace.

A flutter... of... *what?*

Katsuki's gaze snaps to his legs, but it's not dress pants that greet his sight—blue and white lace caress the creamy skin halfway up his thighs instead, and mismatched stockings clinch the skin just above his knees. They trail down to heeled boots in red and black, white rabbit ears peeking out the top and what looks like a miniature version of Deku's fluffy *tail* stuck to the back when he raises a foot to inspect his boots

a little better, but they're not the polished shoes he had on to begin with.

*None* of his current attire—from the pristine white apron to the frilly cuffs clinging to his wrists—was what he'd been wearing to begin with, and it's enough to make Katsuki's face contort when he forces out a strangled, "*Hah?! Where the hell did my clothes go?*"

Nobody's voice emerges from the cavernous gloom he's fallen into, but Katsuki's stance remains firm and undaunted as his palms crackle and his eyes narrow.

"You damn Deku—" Because it'd been *his* fault he'd fallen in, so what was to say that *this* wasn't his fault too? "—give me back my clothes *right now* or I *swear*—"

"Swearing is quite unbecoming, you know!"

Katsuki's jaw snaps shut at the loud, booming voice—but no bright yellow hair or gaunt body emerges from the shadows. It's not until he's made a visual sweep of the place that he notices a well-lit corridor framed by doors, but there's no sign of All Might there. Oh, there are *paintings* of him during his different ages and every door is well and truly locked, but...

"Auditory hallucinations," Katsuki mutters to himself when he reaches the end of the corridor and almost bumps into a little glass table. "First Deku and now All Might—the ball's driven me *insane*."

"Not so!" that all-too-familiar voice booms out again, and Katsuki blasts away part of the table before he can get himself under control.

But, *where* is he? There are only locked doors behind him and this stupid little glass table—but just as Katsuki's ready to blast the walls apart, he notices a curtain that barely reached his knees.

And as he moves towards it, hand stretching out to pull the curtain aside, it twitches open on its own.

"I am *here*," All Might yells from behind the curtain, "offering advice like a normal person!"

"Young Bakugou!" he continues, grinning up from where his face is... embedded in a door. *Well, alright then*, Katsuki thinks to himself, even as All Might's grin widens and he adds, "You have too much youthful passion in you to pass through! I would suggest drinking the concoction on the table!"

Katsuki turns to see a small glass bottle on the warped, smoking table, but there's only irritation in his tone when he mutters, "I'm not *deaf*, you know—I can hear you just fine."

"Do not worry, for it is quite nutritious and tasty!" All Might exclaims, as though Katsuki hadn't spoken at all. "The springtime of your youth will not diminish, my boy, mark my words!"

He's not sure *what* face he pulls in response to that, but All Might's beaming grin falters a little. *Good*, Katsuki thinks vindictively, and sneers down at him before asking, "What if I don't *want* to drink it, hah? What're you gonna do, *yell* me into



submission?"

"That would be rather unheroic of me, wouldn't it?" All Might replies. "But then the story wouldn't progress if you didn't follow the script, you know!"

"The *what* now?"

"The script!" All Might's obnoxiously cheery grin is back in full force—so bright, in fact, that Katsuki has to shield his eyes from all his sparkling white teeth. "You see, Young Bakugou, once you have drunk from the concoction and failed to open me up—"

"Could you say that *without* making it sound weird?"

"—you will then partake of a cake, expand to gigantic proportions, drown half this corridor and myself in a pool of tears, and then proceed onwards with young Midoriya's help!" All Might says right over the top of Katsuki's complaint. "Isn't that right, young Midoriya?"

"That's exactly right, All Might!" a chipper voice exclaims, and Bakugou whips around to see Deku in his Victorian rabbit getup. "You might want to hurry him along though—Kacchan took far too much time arriving here as is."

"I'm *right here*, you damn extras," Katsuki growls, palms crackling with barely restrained explosions.

"So," he snarls as Deku's face pales, "you wanna repeat that bit about me *crying* or being a little *slow* again?"

"I, uh, wouldn't need to if you drink from that bottle, Kacchan?" Deku tries with a weak little smile.

A gullible idiot might've happily turned around and followed his suggestion—but because Katsuki possesses a *brain*, and a *functional* one at that, he gives Deku the dirty look that deserves before he takes a single step towards him. "You have exactly *three* seconds to run before I smash your face into the ground," he tells Deku—

But he's already flying towards Deku by the last word, dress whipping around his legs from the explosions and *something* tugging at his hair too. Deku, for his part, manages a single *eep* before he's racing down the corridor in a crackle of green lightning.

"Get *back* here!" Katsuki howls and follows Deku through a previously-locked door.

"Ah, the springtime of youth!" All Might sighs behind him, and twitches his curtain shut.



The room Katsuki bursts into isn't so much a room as it is a forest—*like an overgrown version of that godawful garden*, he thinks irritably to himself, even as he deftly manoeuvres around a tree trunk and chases after Deku's fleeing form. As much as Katsuki hates to admit it, they're evenly matched in speed when they're

both using their Quirks...

So why the hell is Deku *disappearing into the distance*?

Katsuki cranks up his Quirk until he can barely feel his palms through the crackling, teeth gritted so tightly that he almost cracks a tooth, but it's no use—Deku's *gone*. First-year Katsuki might've blown up the entire forest in his attempt to find Deku... but in his present state, all he does is snarl and clench his numb hands.

"I'm gonna *wring* his neck when I get my hands on him," Katsuki grumbles under his breath, eyes darting around for any sign of white or red—

Only to catch a glimpse of yellow in his periphery.

It's instinctive to whirl on his heels and bring his hands up, palms facing outwards for a strong blast—but the spot of yellow doesn't hurtle towards him. It doesn't even *move* until Katsuki stomps a little closer, hands still raised in preparation for a potential attack, but then Katsuki's brain registers more than just a blob of bright yellow.

"Aizawa?" he asks, hands flopping down to his sides—

But Aizawa only blinks before he slurps loudly on his juice box.

His teacher—who he'd just *talked* to before he'd chased rabbit-Deku and fallen down that hole, what the *hell*—is lying on a mushroom that barely manages to fit him, sleeping bag obscuring all but his face and a few lanky strands of hair. There's a moment when Katsuki almost smooths down his skirt and stands a little straighter, well aware of his teacher's strict standards, but then he catches himself with a shake of his head.

He's in a *skirt*, for goodness' sake, and Aizawa's staring at him from his goddamn *sleeping bag*.

"You gonna just slurp that all day or *what*?" Katsuki barks, and Aizawa blinks again before the juice box falls from his lips.

"Is that how you'd normally speak to me?" Aizawa asks languidly, propping his body up with a few ungainly wriggles. "Looks like your clothes aren't the only thing that's changed about you."

Katsuki promptly flushes red.

Aizawa doesn't say anything more, though—and for all that he's got far too many questions in his head, Katsuki finds himself opening and closing his hands instead. After all, what's the point of asking Aizawa where Deku is? Or, for that matter, why they're in the middle of a forest when they should be in a ballroom?!

"If you need to go to the toilet," Aizawa dryly says, when Katsuki begins shifting from foot to foot, "there are trees all around us."

**Whose** bladder is full, you stupid old man, Katsuki barely manages to swallow back, and breathes shallowly through his nose before he snaps, "What I *need* is to get away from all of this!"

Katsuki doesn't bother gesturing at the forest, but Aizawa only blinks and slurps

at his juice box as though he really *doesn't* know what Katsuki's talking about. He stares at his teacher—or whatever's *pretending* to be his teacher, since there's nothing logical about him right now—but Aizawa continues slurping with hollowed cheeks and lazy blinks.

Just when Katsuki's about to snatch his juice box and toss it into the forest, though—"Where do you want to be?" Aizawa asks around the straw in his mouth.

Katsuki's jaw sags open.

"You said you wanted to get away," Aizawa continues, as if he's not asking a completely *illogical* question, "so logically speaking, you want to be somewhere particular."

"I," Katsuki says in a choked voice, "want to get *out* of whatever fever dream this is!"

"Then wake up," Aizawa replies, and...

Is he wriggling away? Does he *actually* have a fever? Katsuki scrubs a hand over his face and almost knocks the bow off his head—but it's not long before Aizawa's crawled off into the distance.

"If I could've woken up," Katsuki mutters under his breath, kicking at the mushroom's fleshy stem, "then I would've *done* that already, goddammit."

Unfortunately, the mushroom doesn't respond—and after a few minutes of waiting, with Aizawa nowhere in sight and nothing but trees as far as the eye can see, Katsuki sighs loudly before he picks a random direction and trudges off.

It's not like he could possibly get *more* lost in this godforsaken forest, right?



"You look a little lost there, Kacchan!" Katsuki hears in between one heavy footstep and the next. If he had any less self-restraint, he would've *thrown* himself into Kaminari's arms—

Except Kaminari's dressed in the most eye-searing ensemble Katsuki's ever seen him wear, seemingly unbothered by his bright yellow shirt, inflated red overalls and oversized blue bow. *Are you actually colourblind?* Katsuki thinks about asking Kaminari, but then he spots Sero standing behind Kaminari.

Sero, who's wearing clothing *identical* to Kaminari's, and...

"I think I'm good, thanks," Katsuki tells Kaminari and Sero, and marches away from them.

"But you're not following the script!" Sero calls after him. "You really should be—"

"Anywhere but here?" Katsuki snaps yet *again*, upping his pace when he hears Kaminari and Sero rushing after him. Honestly, how many times does he have to *repeat* himself? "I don't *care* about your goddamn script—I'd rather get my cheek pinched by some handsy old lady than stay in this hellish hallucination!"

"Lovely alliteration!" Sero cheerfully compliments. Katsuki only scoffs and starts jogging when he feels a hand swipe—unsuccessfully, thank *god*—at the lace tying his apron to his waist.

"C'mon, Kacchan—"

"Call me that again and *die*."

"—the tea's getting cold!" Kaminari whines right over his snarled protest. "*Her* tarts will all get gobbled up too, and then we'll all have to figure out a new script for you!"

"Then tell whoever the *hell's* responsible for this 'script' of yours to bugger off and leave me alone!" Katsuki yells, stopping in pace so suddenly that Kaminari and Sero almost collide into him.

"Goddamn *Deku* shoved me down a hole," he snarls as he spins around, yanking their bowties and half-strangling them in the process, "I've been forced to wear a *dress* since I fell into this weird place, got told I wasn't *youthful* enough by All Might as a *doorknob*, chased *Deku* into this godforsaken *forest* and—"

"Have you gone mad?"

Katsuki's head swivels around, eyes wide and bloodshot with the sheer fervour of his rage, but then his expression freezes and falters into something less manic. Todoroki doesn't seem to care, from the way he's swinging his legs and peering down at Katsuki without a single shift in *his* expression, but...

"Are you cosplaying," Katsuki asks in a choked voice, "as a *cat*?"

"I'm a Cheshire cat," Todoroki corrects him without batting a lash.

Katsuki arches a single brow at him. The alternative would be throwing Kaminari and Sero at his inexplicably furry classmate—but even *they* don't deserve such treatment.

Kaminari and Sero are suspiciously silent and unmoving, for all that his attention's on Todoroki now—but there's no time for him to question their attempts at playing dead. There's only Todoroki in his eyes right now, Todoroki tilting his head while his cat ears stay jauntily perked and a hand crooks into something akin to a paw, and Katsuki's just about to yell at him when Todoroki opens his mouth.

"Nyan."

A moment of silence, a single blink, and then—

"You have issues," Katsuki solemnly tells him.

"Says you," Todoroki replies with the faintest of smiles.

"I'm not the one trying to strangle two piles of clothing," he adds with a nod, smile widening even as Katsuki narrows his eyes at him, but then Katsuki turns back around.

Kaminari's and Sero's clothing are just as blinding as ever—but there aren't any yelling idiots in them. Their shirts and overalls and bowties are still *in his hands* but



Kaminari and Sero aren't *wearing* them, and it's not until a fluffy tail curls over his left forearm that he snaps out of his shock.

(a small part of Katsuki can't help imagining Kaminari and Sero creeping away in their underwear while he'd been baffled by Todoroki's *everything*, but it doesn't take him long to purge the thought from his mind)

"Get your tail *off* me," Katsuki barks, dropping Kaminari's and Sero's clothing to swat at the offending appendage. "What kind of warped cat *are* you, you bi-coloured weirdo."

"I'm a Cheshire cat—"

"And you think that *matters* to me?"

The tip of Todoroki's tail flicks Katsuki's nose, even as his ears flatten atop his head and his smile dims, but Katsuki's too busy sneezing from his long fur to pay Todoroki any heed. "Do you *mind*?" he snarls when his nose *finally* stops itching, but Todoroki only gives him a half-shrug in response.

*Useless as always*, Katsuki scoffs to himself, and shoves Todoroki's tail off *again* when it tries to drape itself across his shoulders. The damn thing is *far* too touchy when its owner rarely engages in physical contact—*that*, Katsuki thinks with a narrow-eyed glare, when he notices Todoroki's smile widen out of the corner of his eye, *or he's enjoying all this*.

Just the *thought* is enough to make chills race down his spine.

But as much as Katsuki wants to break into a run and leave Todoroki behind... what were the odds that he'd continue to wander in the forest? With no discernible differences between each unnaturally straight tree-trunk and with his palms aching lightly from his earlier attempt to catch Deku, there was only so much he could do to mark a path in the forest.

Todoroki, for all his flaws and his annoyingly clingy tail, was at least of *some* use in leading him towards two clearly defined roads.

*...Wait a minute...*

Katsuki's gaze snaps from one path to the next—but apart from their inexplicable appearance in the middle of an otherwise-uniform forest, there's nothing special about them. They're neatly swept of leaves, pebbles lining the sides and blackish-brown dirt paving the two straight roads, and Katsuki almost bends down to pinch a bit of dirt when Todoroki's tail pins his arms to his sides.

"One road leads to a Hatter," Todoroki informs him in a mild voice, uncaring of Katsuki's swearing and irritated attempts to wriggle free of his hold, "and the other leads to a March Hare. They're both mad, but not in the way you are."

"Screw you, Candy Cane!"

"But maybe I'm wronging them by sending you to them," Todoroki continues thoughtfully, as though Katsuki hadn't cursed him at all. "Maybe..."

"What?" Katsuki snarls. "Don't tell me you want me to *stay* with you in this godforsaken forest."

"I don't want to baby you for much longer anyway," Todoroki agrees with apparent relief, eyes curving up in an *incredibly* creepy smile—

And just as Katsuki opens his mouth to curse Todoroki again, the blasted cat disappears into thin air.

There's no birdsong, no light breeze rustling the leaves by his feet or on the trees—it's utterly silent beyond his breathing, and Katsuki clenches his fists as he glares at the spot Todoroki had just been occupying. Cosplaying rabbits, cosplaying cats... Katsuki grinds his teeth, swears under his breath, and puts a single foot down on the path to the Hatter's place.

"I wouldn't go there, if I were you," an all-too-familiar voice says right behind him. "That's not what the script says."

Katsuki squeezes his eyes shut, breathes deeply through his nose and ekes out a growled, "*Don't* tell me what to do, Half n' Half."

"I'm just giving you a suggestion," Todoroki replies.

"And I don't *need* it!" Katsuki snaps, throwing an elbow behind himself and biting back a snarl when Todoroki smoothly dodges it.

He whips around, palms crackling—but there's no Todoroki in sight.

"Come out here and let me hit you, you goddamn coward!" Katsuki yells, but Todoroki's soft laughter seems to come from all around him.

"Maybe I will," Todoroki says without bothering to make himself visible, "if you can catch me."

"I'll stand still and close my eyes when you finally catch up to me," Todoroki adds as he appears down the March Hare's path, wriggling his fingers at Katsuki in a mocking wave—and when Katsuki roars, charging down the path towards him, Todoroki laughs before vanishing again.



Chasing Deku had been infuriating, both because the stupid nerd wasn't *supposed* to be faster than him and because they were *meant* to be at a stuffy ball instead—but chasing Todoroki is somehow, *incredibly, worse*. In between his uncharacteristic smiles, all the fur he sheds as he swishes his tail and his penchant for vanishing as soon as Katsuki's about to catch him...

"Well, well, look who decided to grace my humble tea-table!" an obnoxious voice calls out, but Katsuki only flips Monoma off as he desperately keeps himself from collapsing.

The ears on Monoma's head are larger than Deku's, soft cream where Deku's were forest-green, but it's the oversized teacup he's cradling in his hands that captures

most of Katsuki's attention. He'd ignored the drink All Might had pointed out to him and had barely touched a glass throughout the ball, too busy trying not to blow his top from all the puerile small talk he'd been forced to engage in—and after all that running, it's all he can do to keep from snatching Monoma's cup right out of his hands.

It's not just Monoma at the table, though. Katsuki can hear whistling snores coming from *somewhere* near the table—which is so laden with teacups, teapots and dirty plates that Katsuki's eyes start twitching at the mess—and there's a shock of familiar purple hair crammed beneath the gaudiest top hat Katsuki's ever had the misfortune to see.

"I'd tell you to sit," Monoma says while Shinsou blinks at Katsuki, "but there's simply no *room* left, so you'll just have to run along."

Katsuki eyes the thirty or so *empty* chairs at the table, sneers at Monoma's bland smile, and sits down in a squashy armchair.

"Hard of hearing *and* idiotic, I see," Katsuki thinks he hears Monoma mutter under his breath, but he's all smiles and dainty sips when Katsuki glares at him.

"Want some coffee?" Shinsou offers around a yawn, waving vaguely at a kettle by Katsuki's elbow.

Katsuki nods, picking out the cleanest-looking teacup amidst the chaos—but what comes out is very clearly tea.

"Oh my god, he actually thought there'd be *coffee* at a tea-table!" Monoma howls, almost falling out of his chair with the sheer force of his laughter, and Shinsou smacks him upside the head before tossing back an entire steaming cup of tea.

"Why'd you offer coffee if you didn't *have* any then?" Katsuki asks over Monoma's cackling.

"Why'd you sit without being invited to the tea party?" Shinsou asks him right back, and Monoma takes one look at Katsuki's expression before he slaps the table with renewed howls of laughter.

Katsuki pitches his half-filled teacup at Monoma's head, but he only tilts his head to the side and lets it crash against a distant tree-trunk. Two plates shatter against other tree-trunks as Katsuki pelts them at Monoma, followed by a dainty sugar-jar—

But just as Katsuki's about to pick up a chair and break it across Monoma's tear-streaked face, the whistling snores stop and red feathers pin his wrist cuffs to the table.

"Haven't you been taught not to fight at the dinner table?" Hawks asks from... beneath Shinsou. How Shinsou's capable of drinking tea while he's sitting on a Pro Hero's *lap* is completely beyond Katsuki, as is the bored expression on Hawks' face when he peers around Shinsou and adds, "Nice ruffles you got there, kid."

Shinsou sets down his teacup, eyes Katsuki's outfit and says with a little smirk, "I don't know, I think pink lace would suit him better."

"Pink lace with *sparkles*," Monoma chimes in, toasting nobody in particular with his empty teacup before he pulls a scone out of nowhere, and the tablecloth catches on fire beneath Katsuki's palms.

Nobody bats a lash at the acrid stench of burning tablecloth or charred crumbs.

"Well, that'll save on electricity costs," Shinsou muses seconds later, and Monoma nods before placing a full teapot directly on Katsuki's right hand.

The cold tea that spills from the teapot rather conveniently douses the flames, though the teapot joins the first cup as shards at the base of a tree.

"So anyway," Hawks says when Katsuki falls back into his seat, mouse ears flicking back and forth restlessly on his head, "pass the butter, will you?"

Katsuki opens his mouth, stares at the ears wiggling atop Hawks' head, and shuts his mouth.

"Any time now," Hawks adds, and wiggles his fingers when Katsuki's teeth grind audibly.

*I **knew** I should've gone down the other path*, Katsuki thinks with no small amount of regret, but passes the butter without anything more than a mutinous glare.

Monoma's brows almost shoot off his forehead at the sight, but Hawks smiles before dumping the entire slab of butter into a teacup with... a pocket-watch, of all things.

"You must be wondering about the ears, right?" Hawks asks as he greases the pocket-watch. Katsuki rolls his eyes without bothering to make it subtle, earning a muffled snort from Monoma and another tired blink from Shinsou, but Hawks cheerfully continues his nonsensical greasing as he says, "It's because I'm a Dormouse."

"And you're just as barmy as the Hatter and the Hare?"

"It's short for condor-mouse, you know," Hawks tells him in a carrying whisper, and mimes zipping his lips before adding rather seriously, "but don't tell these two—they just think I'm an ordinary door-loving mouse."

Katsuki stares at Hawks before he looks at Shinsou and Monoma, but Monoma's too busy having a one-sided conversation with Shinsou about ravens and writing-desks to pay Katsuki any mind. Hawks only shrugs, gives him an exaggerated wink when Katsuki's gaze returns to him—and pours an entire pot of tea on the buttery pocket-watch.

"This is absolute crap," Katsuki grumbles to himself, getting up from the armchair and stalking away from the tea-table. "Mad doesn't even *begin* to describe these morons."

"And don't come back if you know what's good for you, you ugly coffee-loving heathen!" Monoma shouts after him as Katsuki steps foot into the forest again—but when he looks back, there's nothing but trees, and the tea-table is nowhere in sight.





Katsuki doesn't know how long it's been since he'd left Monoma, Shinsou and Hawks behind, but it's long enough for him to all but *sprint* towards the door when one magically appears on a tree-trunk. It doesn't even matter that he's back in the hallway he'd started off in, where All Might's snoring behind his curtain and the other doors are all still locked—but after a careful search, Katsuki realizes that All Might's door is set into a *larger* door, and it's not long before he forces it open enough to slip through.

All Might awakens with an ungainly snort at the jostling, but who cares? The room beyond All Might's door *isn't* a forest—though it's still filled with too much greenery and not enough ballroom for his liking—and Katsuki slams the door shut on All Might's hearty, "Congratulations on following the script, Young Bakugou!"

If he'd known the damn script would've bypassed that entire dreaded forest *earlier*, he would've squeezed all the tears out from Deku and *followed* it!

"Stupid fever dream," Katsuki mutters irritably, and aims a kick at a peculiar-looking tree.

It's not peculiar in that it's perfectly straight—it's barely taller than Katsuki, more like a tall bush than a sapling or dwarf-tree, and its branches are densely packed with leaves and flowers. What's peculiar about it are the *colour* of the flowers, white with splashes of red that almost look like someone had shed *blood* onto them—

But before Katsuki can pluck a flower from the tree and observe it more closely, an ear-splitting shriek cuts through the air.

If Katsuki had been expecting to find a damsel in distress, though...

"Toga-chan's going to have our *heads!*" Twice bawls at the top of his lungs, and Katsuki almost face-plants from how fast he stops in place.

There's a moment, when Twice locks eyes with him, that Katsuki thinks he'll have to battle it out with him—but another Twice dashes out from between two trees and stomps on the first Twice's foot.

"This wouldn't have been an issue if you'd just *listened* to me!" the second Twice yells, and the first Twice leaves off staring at Katsuki to howl and hop in place.

"Didn't you hear Toga-chan the first time?!" the second Twice continues yelling over the first's infernal racket. "These are meant to be *red* roses, Twice Seven!"

"Who wants tacky red roses except for *you*, Twice Five?" Twice Seven immediately leaves off howling to retort, whipping around and almost smashing Twice Five in the crotch with his paint bucket. "Toga-chan would prefer *white* roses!"

"I'm telling you, the roses should be *red!*" Twice Seven yells, splattering everything in a ten-metre radius with red paint from his still-wet brush—including an incredibly unimpressed Katsuki.

"And I'm telling *you*," Twice Five yells right back, flicking white paint all over Twice Seven's face, "that the roses should be *white!*"

Most people might take the opportunity to sneak away while the two Twices were busy flinging paint at each other—but Katsuki isn't most people, and both Twices fall silent when he marches up to them.

"If you two don't stop yelling," Katsuki says in a voice that definitely isn't .5 seconds away from a scream, "you're both going to be painted *red*. In your *blood*."

"I-I still have a bucket of red paint you could use," Twice Five tries to tell him, but he shrinks back at the manic light in Katsuki's eyes.

Distantly, Katsuki finds it in himself to muster up amusement at the identical looks of terror on Twices' faces—but then there's a hoarse scream and a *third* Twice falls out of a nearby tree.

"Too late!" the new Twice exclaims over the sound of many footsteps, "Toga-chan's here!"

"Toga-chan!" the other Twices shriek, and all three fall flat on their faces.

What Katsuki sees next is, somehow, the strangest thing he's seen since he'd fallen down that hole—and *that's saying something*, a small voice in the back of Katsuki's mind tells him.

It's not the thirty Twice clones cavorting about that make it weird, though goodness knows why they're holding club-shaped spears or gleaming from diamond-shaped stickers or snatching heart-shaped candy from each other. It's not even Deku's blasé appearance while being surrounded by so many Twice clones, or the distracted smile he's giving *Nedzu*, of all people.

It's the two girls skipping arm-in-arm that almost make Katsuki's eyes bug out of his head, because Twice clones are one thing but Hatsume and Toga together are *something else*, and he barely notices the entire procession stopping before him in his utter confusion.

"You should've come earlier, minion!" Hatsume huffs, but Katsuki only snaps out of his thoughts when she shoves her face into his. "We were missing a croquet player because of you, you know."

"But you're just in time for a trial, so come along now!" Hatsume adds, linking her arm with his—

Only for Katsuki to shake his arm free and shove Hatsume back.

"Who the hell wants to go with you lot?" Katsuki snaps, scrubbing furiously at the spittle flecking his face. "You're all mad! Just throw yourselves into jail and be done with it!"

He doesn't see Toga's smile widen while her eyes light up with manic cheer—but Katsuki *does* hear the pitter-patter of rapidly approaching footsteps. "Are you deaf?!" Katsuki yells without pausing in his scrubbing, taking a few hurried steps back as well—

But without his vision guiding him, Katsuki almost trips—only for someone to tug on his skirt and yank him upright again.

Any thought of thanking his saviour dies when Katsuki's gaze meets bright button eyes.

He hadn't seen much of Nedzu, not when he'd been a full half-body shorter than practically *anyone* in the crowd, but there's no mistaking the black-and-red finery he's decked out in. There's even a delicate ruby-encrusted crown on his head, ears peeking out from the silver circlet, and it's just so weird that Katsuki doesn't notice Nedzu speaking.

Not until Nedzu jumps to wave a soft-looking paw in his face, anyway, and then...

"Come now, young Bakugou," Nedzu says, "will you keep avoiding the script like a coward?"

"*What* did you just call me?"

"A coward!" Nedzu repeats happily, unaware of the way Deku's choking and Toga's giggling behind him. "If even I, the most adorable mammalian king, can cosy up with a known villain without batting a lash—then what are *you*, pray tell?"

Katsuki splutters before he can help himself, hands clenching tightly into fists and eyes narrowing dangerously at Nedzu, but the rat-bear-mouse-*something* continues to beam up at him. "Someone should've provided you with a wig to complete the Alice cosplay—"

"*Who's* cosplaying—"

"But no matter!" Nedzu exclaims and raises his paws in a clear demand.

"Oh my god, I'd *love* to cuddle King Nedzu," someone whispers in the crowd.

His first instinct is to ignore Nedzu and walk off, insult be damned—but with so many eyes watching him and *coward* fresh in everyone's mind, Katsuki grits his teeth and picks Nedzu up.

"Ah, how wonderful it is to be almost six feet tall!" Nedzu sighs, and pats Katsuki's head in thanks.

It hasn't escaped Katsuki's notice that Toga hasn't said a word yet, for all that she's the only other person who has a crown on their head. It *also* hasn't escaped his notice that everyone subconsciously gravitates towards her, either—but before he can figure out *why*, Toga finally opens her mouth.

"You've all been ignoring me for our new guest," she laments in a far-too-cheery tone. "If I didn't know better, I'd think you all want to make Katsuki queen!"

"Do I *look* like a girl to you?" Katsuki snarls, but Toga only flushes and pats his head with a flutter of her lashes.

"You look positively *adorable* in that dress!" Toga hums. "If I didn't have to follow the script, I'd chop off your head so I don't have any competition!"

"But we have a trial to attend," Toga sighs, wiping imaginary tears from the corners of her eyes, "so I guess we'll have to chop your head off later."

"I'll lend you one of my super cute babies to preserve his body parts afterwards," Hatsume earnestly promises Toga as the entire procession begins moving again—

And with nothing better to do than follow along, Katsuki readjusts Nedzu in his arms and follows after Hatsume and Toga. It's not as though this stupid hallucination could get any worse, right?



*The stupid hallucination got worse*, Katsuki grudgingly admits to himself, narrowly resisting the urge to shove his face into his hands as Toga and Dabi pull increasingly childish faces at each other. That the idiots comprising the jury are *drawing* their expressions only makes it worse—*especially* when Deku leans over and gives Kaminari art pointers in a polite, if vaguely strained, whisper.

What the hell is Kaminari *doing* here, anyway? Half the jury are filled with Twice clones, two of which are *still* arguing about the colour of those goddamn flowers, and the other half make *those* buffoons look smart in comparison. Sero's drawings are passably human—unlike the blobs on Kaminari's slate—and Monoma's are surprisingly decent, if Katsuki looks past his penchant for exaggeration.

If he didn't know any better, Katsuki would think he'd crashed in on an amateur still life course... minus the stillness. The speed at which Toga goes from wagging her tongue to squishing her cheeks is almost as fast as Nedzu's consumption of cheese—which is saying something when he's stuffing entire blocks into his mouth.

"So what's the trial about, anyway?" Hawks asks from beside him, and Katsuki rolls his eyes without looking away from the spectacle before them.

Thankfully—or not, depending on how he sees things—Nedzu hears Hawks' asinine question.

"Have we started? I thought it was still tea-time!" Nedzu exclaims, dabbing gently at his lips even as he glances longingly at his crumb-infested tea. Monoma pauses in his drawing to raise his brows at Nedzu, affront stark in his expression at the very *thought* of tea-time being over—but then Nedzu smacks the table with a heavy paw and announces, "Silence in the court!"

Instantly, the jury leaves off drawing Toga and Dabi to write Nedzu's words.

"Let's finish this trial before my tea goes cold, then," Nedzu sighs over jury's furious scribbling, and imperiously waves in Deku's direction.

What follows is enough to make Katsuki shove his face into his hands.

There's a poem about the Queen of Hearts—which explains a lot about the crown on Toga's head, Katsuki supposes—and her tarts, though the table in between Toga and Dabi is filled with what looks like bits of raw flesh.

"I'm short a tart!" Toga exclaims before Deku's done reading the first *stanza*, pointing mournfully at the lumps. "And it's all *your* fault, stupid Dabi!"

"Oh, I thought we were talking about *edible* tarts," Hawks mutters, even as Katsuki



swallows back a scream. He did *not* need to know those were bits of Toga's former love interests, what the *hell*?

"You think I care about your victims?" Dabi retorts in the midst of Katsuki's mini-breakdown, curling his lips and shoving his hands into his ratty coat pockets. "At least I actually uphold Stain's ideology—unlike you and your obsession with *tarts*."

"It's not my fault they hit on me first!" Toga protests airily. "Though why one of them would go to *you* to get killed is beyond me."

"If you'd just done your *job* instead of luring random tarts off the street—"

"Go pick your *own* victims instead of taking mine, *ugly*—"

"Excuse me, please—we're here for *theft*, not serial murder!" Nedzu interjects and slaps a paw over Toga's mouth before turning his head to declare, "Call the first witness!"

Katsuki raises his head long enough to see Shinsou slouching into the court, a tea-cup in one hand and a buttered scone in the other.

"If *I'm* not allowed to have tea-time, then you shouldn't either!" Nedzu declares before Shinsou can open his mouth—and a pair of Twices promptly toss Shinsou right out again.

Katsuki breathes in slowly, politely refrains from screaming, and shoves his face back into his hands.

"Call the next witness!" Nedzu informs Deku, and Katsuki hears the nerd stomping in the court before silence falls over it.

Is it too much to hope for the entire thing to *end*? Katsuki keeps his face shoved firmly into his hands, ears pricked for any sign of movement—but then there's a light cough *right in front of him* and a heavy hand pats his shoulder.

"Come on, Kacchan," Deku informs him in a too-sweet voice, and the stupid nerd has to audacity to *smile* at him when Katsuki raises his face from his hands again.

Deku's face should be above his when Katsuki looks up—as much as it galls him to admit it, it's only *natural* when he's sitting and the nerd's standing. When he looks up and finds that he's looking *down* on Deku's head, though...

"Kacchan?" Deku asks, bunny ears flopping back on his head when he looks up at Katsuki.

"Shaddup, Deku," Katsuki mutters, and shoves at Deku's face before vaulting over the stands.

That his palm is *bigger* than Deku's entire stupid face is a thought Katsuki will ponder later—*after* whatever stupid evidence he has to give at the entire tart-stealing affair.

"What do you know about this business?" Nedzu asks over Toga's quiet giggling, steepling his paws beneath his chin.

"Nothing."

"Nothing whatsoever?"

"You found me a few minutes ago and asked me to carry you around," Katsuki elaborates in a dust-dry voice. "You really think I could've gone and stolen her *tart* in that time?"

"Well-said, minion!" Hatsume yells before Nedzu or Toga can open their mouths. When Katsuki glares back at the jury, though, Hatsume's busy... sweet-talking her slate.

*Barking mad, the lot of them*, Katsuki tells himself after a few moments, and turns his gaze back to the front when Toga noisily clears her throat.

Except he can't see Toga or Nedzu in front of him.

"You're giving me an awful ache in my neck, young Bakugou!" Nedzu complains from somewhere near his waist, and Katsuki looks down to see the entire *court* straining to look up at him.

Never-ending holes, never-ending forests and now never-ending growth—*this stupid hallucination*, Katsuki snarls internally, and looks down in time for Toga to chirp, "I think we should just chop off his head—then he'll stop growing and we can chop off Dabi's head next!"

"But what about the verdict?" Deku asks with a scratch of his head.

"Sentence first, verdict later!" Toga cheerfully retorts.

"The hell're you looking for a verdict when all you've done is *nothing*?" Katsuki asks waspishly.

"Chop off his head anyway!" Toga yells up at him, abruptly standing in place.

"You can damn well try," Katsuki sneers down at her, "but you're nothing but a bunch of idiots from my godawful fever dream!"

Toga stomps her foot and screams, while every Twice in the room screams with her and surges up to swarm over his head—



"...c'mon, this is *Bakugou* we're talking about. You really think he'll stay knocked out from a brick to the—and speak of the devil!"

Katsuki groans, cracking an eye open and immediately closing it again—but it's not the pristine blue of that farcical court's sky seared in his vision. There's a moment, in between a cool cloth wiping at his forehead and low murmurs too soft to make out, that Katsuki almost hopes...

But when he cracks both eyes open, it's to the sight of a cream-coloured ceiling and Sero's wide eyes.

"How many fingers am I holding up?" Kaminari asks, but he's only waved his middle finger in Katsuki's face once before it's seized in a crackling palm. "Okay, I was kidding, he's perfectly fine!" Kaminari squeaks, but Katsuki sits up and shoves his other palm in Kaminari's face.

It should be crackling... but it's *not*.

The lack of explosions becomes evident when thick cloth wraps around his wrist.

"I leave you three for *five* seconds," Aizawa sighs. "Just *five*, and you're already proving why you can't be left in a room together."

"Bakugou's alright, at least?" Sero weakly offers, but Katsuki doesn't need to see Aizawa's face to know he's shaking his head at Sero.

"Try not to make this night any worse than it already is," Aizawa continues in a world-weary voice, as Katsuki reluctantly lets go of Kaminari and the idiot skips out of his range. "We're still waiting for back-up to arrive—"

"*Back-up?*"

"You missed the Front crashing the party," Sero explains with a shrug, patting Katsuki's shoulder with a wry little grin, "but we dealt with them before you woke up from your beauty sleep."

"So you're telling me," Katsuki asks slowly, "that I got *knocked out* by those idiots?"

"Nah, one of them blew the building in," Kaminari cheerfully informs him. "I think you were the only one that got knocked out with a brick to the face, though."

"*Kaminari*," Aizawa sighs sharply, but Katsuki's already launching himself from the floor and lunging at Kaminari's shrieking form. "*Bakugou*," he tries next, except Kaminari's already darting out the door with Katsuki in hot pursuit.

"*Shut up and die!*" rings out across the mostly deserted floor, and as Sero rushes out to intervene somehow...

"Problem children, honestly," Aizawa mutters to himself, and fishes out a juice box from an inner pocket before lamenting, "I'd rather be a butterfly."



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JUN · 20 · 2020









# A Kingdom of Isolation

A Frozen AU by Maggienetic

Once upon a time, a long time ago, there was a kingdom in the far north made of steep mountains and low valleys and covered all over with icy lakes and oft-frozen fields. The winters were cold and biting, and so were the autumns. Spring was chilly but sunny, and summer—well, it was shorter than could be found in other places, but summer was warm and bright even though the mountains of this kingdom were covered with frost that never melted. The people were hard-working and stout-spirited, and they loved and respected the royal family with all their hearts. The king was honest and wise and the queen was good-hearted and kind, and they loved their people well. When in time they had their own children, the kingdom loved those children too. The first-born prince was golden-haired like his father and kind like his mother. The first-born princess was fairer-haired like their mother, but honest like their father.

If the world were fair, they would have all grown happily together, and the only thing that would have parted any of them would have been old age. The world, however, was not a fair place.

From birth, little Princess Eri was different. Sometimes the things she touched would turn to ice. It was a power that scared her from the start, but her elder brother Prince Mirio was never frightened of it. He made of her power a game for the two of them, encouraging her with his smile and words whenever possible.

Together, they build snowmen. Eri is careful and cautious about it, but Mirio isn't always. When she's young and he's a little older, her power slips—and while Mirio promises he isn't mad, that's when Eri truly starts to feel afraid. She stays in her room when she can, and she tries not to meet her brother to play so very often, and when her parents try to make her laugh and smile, she doesn't quite.

Even when they leave to find a way to take the ice from her, she can't bring herself to leave her room. And when she hears that the ship has gone down...

Eri runs away as hard and as fast as she can, without thinking twice.



In her mind, Mirio will get to rule a kingdom of sunshine. Not in winter months, maybe, but if it's just *him*, no one else will get hurt or die. Everyone will be safer if Eri isn't there at all, and probably happier too. In her mind, Eri thinks that this is how to give them all happily ever after.

In reality, her brother chases her, and so do other people. Mirio finds her, once, with someone strange outside her palace, but she chases him away. The person

who takes her from the palace has a strange bird's mask and says her brother needs her. That she *hurt* him.

The ice and snow that overtake their too-frozen kingdom at those words is inescapably strong, and by the time they've nearly crossed the lake to home, Eri doesn't have the strength to go on. The man with the mask says there's nothing left for her, and that she should come with him. He can use her ice for good.

When she refuses, she doesn't see him readying a blade behind her.



Eri had lost many people over the course of her young life. Her mother and father were the biggest loss, the sorest wound laid open in her heart. But there were others, too. The friends she'd had before she'd lost her parents, before she'd become even more frightened of her powers; the friends she'd made for herself once she had left. And now, the one loss she had always been *most* afraid of: her brother. Mirio had always seemed so much larger than life. He had always been brighter than the sun for Eri, and she didn't want to see a world without him. How was she meant to be her father's little moon if the sun didn't exist any longer? How was she meant to be alone? Mirio had promised never to leave her, even when she'd left him, and while she hadn't imagined the world could be a scarier place than it had come to be after she lost her parents—it is.

Or maybe the feeling is loneliness. Or sadness. Or *nothing*. Does nothing burn a hole in your heart as you stare at the statue that used to be your brother, once upon a time?

Eri only comes up to his waist, even with Mirio shielding her like this, bent a little forward to take the blow against his back. She can almost, almost pretend that the ice-statue of her brother is something she made on purpose to keep her company. That the *real* Mirio is still out there somewhere, talking and laughing and waiting for her to come home and play with him.

She can almost pretend that, but not quite.

The cold has never bothered Eri, except it has. The chill on her skin doesn't faze her because she barely feels it and never has. Short sleeves and bare feet in the snow have always been easy because the cold feels comfortable. But the cold has also always set her apart, and in that way it has bothered her. Mirio never minded, even after she hurt him. He was never as comfortable in the cold as Eri was, but he would always put on boots and a jacket and join her.

When Eri reaches out for her brother, the chill of the ice doesn't register as a chill. Her arms go around his waist and she wants him to hug her back, but he won't. Hugging him like this isn't the same. Usually he picks her up and spins her around and laughs, but right now he is so, so still.

She doesn't realize she's crying until the tears crystallize on her face, frozen there, the weight of them tangible against her skin.



"Mirio," Big brother, she thinks. Eri doesn't know what else to say. She doesn't know how to fix this, how to make winter stop, how to make him *warm* again.

The crack of ice doesn't jar her. It's the lake, or the mountains, or something far distant from her thoughts. It isn't until a hand rests comfortably on her shoulder, then the back of her head, isn't until the statue of her brother bends down to hug her, that her eyes open again. "Hey, kiddo," Mirio says. "Don't cry! It's okay."

Someone she doesn't know is behind him. A man with dark hair and strange ears. "An act of true love," he says, in a low quiet voice she only just catches, and Mirio laughs again.

Eri thought for too long that she would never hear that laugh again, and she stares, wide-eyed and frightened it will go away again.

"Mirio?" Her voice is as small as she feels, a crack in the ice.

"It's okay, Eri. You're okay. I've been trying to find you, you know?" Mirio's voice is just as warm as ever. Eri never felt the cold, or never thought she did—but every time she hears her brother's voice, she thinks maybe she has, because it warms her instantly.

But she's still scared. Most of her heart is still frozen in childish fear—but maybe that's because she is, after all, still a child. "You're not mad at me? I hurt you...he said..."

"I could never be mad at you." It's not true, Eri thinks. People always get mad at others—but. But, Mirio never has. He's never been mad at *her*. Mother and father never had been, either. They were all constants in her world, until they had been taken from her. No matter what she did or said to them, they stayed. Eri clutches at Mirio's jacket, still unsure despite this. "It's okay, Eri. You didn't mean to. We can solve this together, okay?"

He doesn't know how to fix winter, of course. Neither does Eri. She's never known fully how to control her powers, even when she's had this time to try to learn. She knows she's much, much stronger than she ever thought—but she doesn't know how to make things *melt*. She can only freeze them, like a monster. "But I ruin everything I touch." It's the truth, spoken quietly. The thing Mirio and her parents never said, but which has always been there.

Her brother grips her hands, pulling them away from his coat, but he doesn't push Eri away. He crouches down before her and cradles her hands like they're precious and not at all dangerous, and she blinks away tears as she looks up at Mirio.

"Don't be silly." It's gently chiding, and so very kind. "You've always made everything you touch better. Colder, sometimes, but better. That castle was amazing, you know? And every snowman you've ever built. And you've never ruined *me*, and I've held your hand lots of times."

"And you *froze*!" And even now there's a shock of white in her brother's hair—like some afterthought from their mother, given too many years late.

"And I melted." Mirio squeezes Eri's hands, smiling the same warmly toasty smile as ever. "I love you so much, you know? You're my baby sister, Eri. I'm *always* going to love you. And that's too warm a thing to ever stay frozen. Okay?"

Eri doesn't understand it. Not entirely. Not immediately. But she knows her hands are warm, and Mirio is there and soothing and smiling, and for the first time in a very long time it *does* feel like it might be okay, simply because he's there. The sunlight to her moonlight, just like their father used to say when they were little. She loves him just as much as she did their parents, in the same unfaltering way, even when she was afraid of hurting him. Maybe especially then. Mirio is friend and protector all in one, and he says that feeling will always be sure to melt him...

So... she has to believe him, doesn't she? Eri knows even if the entire world were to freeze over her brother would never blame her, would try to help her undo it, but she looks at him and across the lake at their home, and she bites her lip.

If she just holds onto that feeling—maybe.

"Love's warm?" Like hugs and drinking hot chocolate in the sitting room curled up against their mother, listening to her father and brother laugh. Like Mirio's hand in hers as they walk outside in the gardens, and he tells her about the people he's met, and people he admires. Her father sneaking her cookies when he thought no one was looking. The way the man she doesn't know looks at her brother, like their mother used to look at their father: all soft-eyed and admiring.

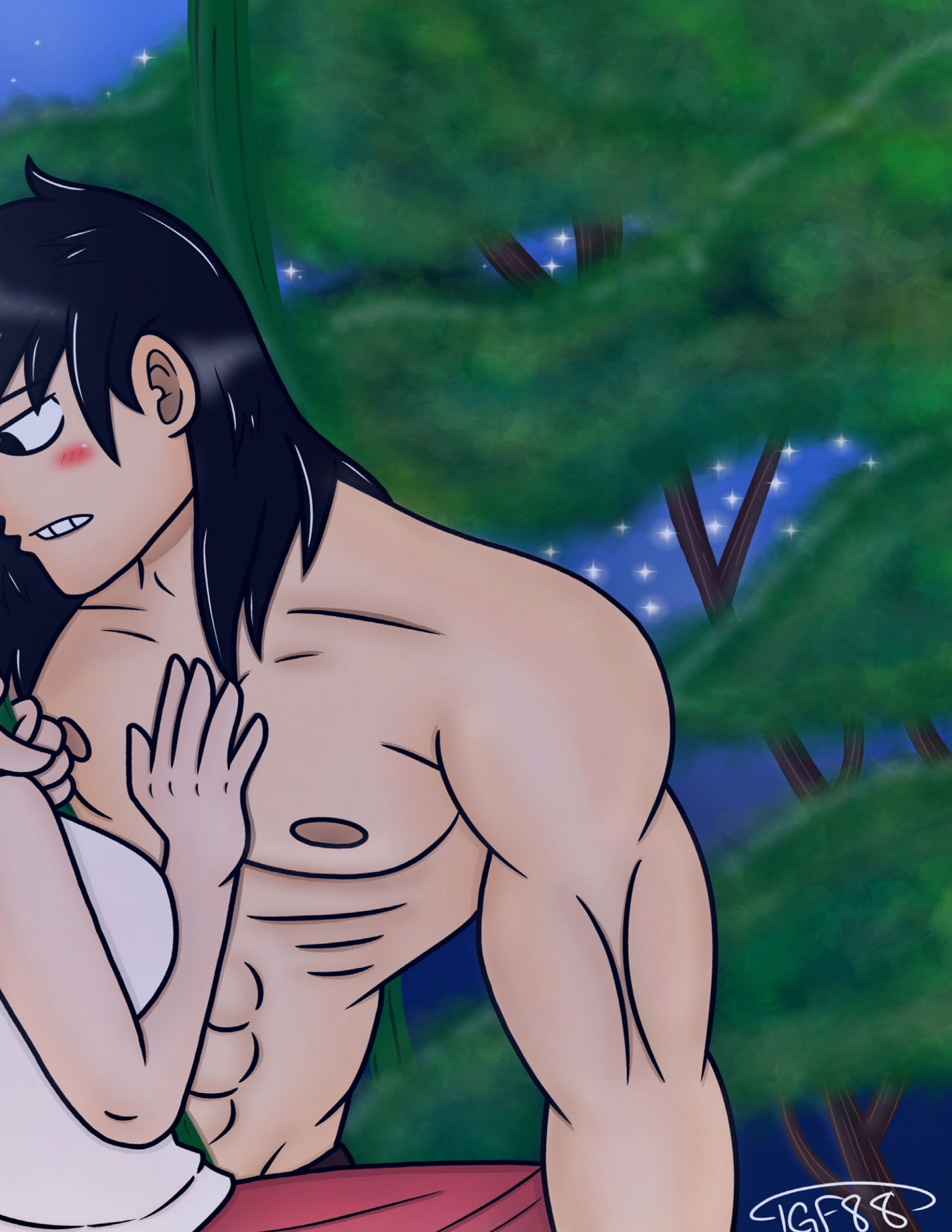
"It is," Mirio promises her, squeezing her hands again.

So, Eri thinks about love. She thinks about her family, those alive and those passed. She thinks about the things she'd still like to do with her brother, the friends she'd like to make, the kingdom she wants to save.

This time when she hears the cracks in the ice, it's the lake melting into summer, and Mirio scoops her up to take her off the surface before they both slip under. By the time they reach the shore, the grass is green again, and too wet from the melted snow, and Eri's safe in her brother's arms as he laughs and holds out a hand to help Tamaki out of the lake.











# A World Apart

A Little Mermaid AU by DrAphra

Touya scowls up at the roiling grey clouds above him, their despairing mood suiting his own black thoughts perfectly. Still, at least he's safe to brood underneath the open sky. Somewhere leagues below him, Enji is probably rallying schools of guards to track down his firstborn heir, but they won't find him up here.

He's been to the surface many times before. Whenever he wants to escape his father or his responsibilities, he takes off at the earliest opportunity and rides the current up to the skies above. To air he can breathe that isn't controlled by *King Enji*.

Today is a day he needs more than just air. He needs to escape his own head too.

*"You cannot wield the Trident. I don't know why I expected anything else from you. Get out of my sight."*

No one but Natsuo knows where Touya goes when their father pushes him too hard, and his brother isn't about to let Enji know where he's disappeared to. Natsuo recognizes Touya's need to escape, more than perhaps anyone else.

*Especially after a day like today*, Touya thinks despondently, glancing down at the seaweed bandages bound around his forearms. Just the act of tilting his head reminds him that his neck is also wrapped thoroughly and he sighs, leaning back into his comfortable position of bobbing atop the waves.

Overhead a sea hawk circles, hunting for fish. The sight of it makes Touya's brows furrow because it means he's closer to land than he's usually comfortable with. How long had he been drifting, anyway?

*Long enough for Fuyumi to be worried, certainly*, he acknowledges, guts twisting in guilt. But still, he makes no move to return to his father's palace and face his icy anger. Or worse, face wielding the Trident once more.

Touya gently rubs his left wrist. The bandages chafe against the worst of the burns, caused by magical backlash from the weapon he can command with far greater power than his father, but with absolutely no control. The wounds nearly cripple him each time, but that never seems to matter to the king of the seven seas.

*You'd think I was a Sea Witch, with how much he hates me. Could swim off to join Ujiko himself, and I don't think it'd change his feelings.*

Sighing again, Touya lets his hand drop back into the ocean with a wet *plop* and contemplates the merits of returning home now or later. Whether his siblings will suffer worse wrath in his absence or not.

*What if I didn't go home at all?* He wonders, glaring at the angry clouds above him. They're edging towards black with the setting sun, and his mood darkens with them. *I could just... leave. Shouto will inherit the Trident anyway—he's more skilled with it than I am and he's only eight. No magical backlash, no painful injuries, just... training with Enji.*

Which is, of course, the crux of the matter. As it always is. That decision had been made years ago, when Touya first held his baby brother in his arms and stared down into his two-toned eyes, awe and love filling his heart to the brim. His own anger aside, it would be agonizing to leave Shouto behind, even knowing that Enji would never truly harm his youngest and most promising progeny. Even knowing... that Enji might go easier on Shouto without Touya around to anger him so.

The realization that his siblings might be better off without him isn't a new one, but the pain cuts like a knife every time. But he's not strong enough to leave them. Not yet.

*I'll go back*, he tells himself, throat tight and eyes hot. *I'll go back and keep Enji occupied. It's the least I can do, if I can't do them the service of getting out of the way. Soon. Just a few more minutes.*

The sun is setting with merciless haste, however, and while merfolk can see well enough in the dark, it's still an awfully long trip back to Atlantica. Especially given how achy he is from training and the near-certainty that he'll be dodging guards just to get back to his room. He shudders at the thought of having to dodge *Enji* on top of his normal guard sharks.

Touya has just about worked up the will to move when an unfamiliar sound registers in his ears. A boom in the distance, followed by... crackling?

He tilts his head back in the water, looking behind him just in time to see a flash of colored sparks reflecting against the darkened clouds. His eyes widen at the sight.

"What is that...?" He murmurs, flipping himself onto his belly to see right-side-up. But still, he has no idea what the cacophonous bloom of colored light is, even as another shoots up to take its place.

*Wait, shoots **up**?* His eyes drop back to sea level, catching on a ship in the distance.

His heart leaps in his chest at seeing one in action—a real live *human* ship! He'd only ever seen their remains at the bottom of the ocean and gone through all the strange artefacts they'd left behind.

But a real one? With actual *humans* on it?

Touya bites his lip. Many merfolk fear humans to an almost irrational degree. Many others make sport of them, using their magical gifts to play with humans like toys—conjuring up whirlpools and cyclones just to watch the humans flail.

Enji falls into the category of merfolk who see humans as nothing more than sand between the scales. An irritation and a nuisance, more than anything—much like

how he sees Touya. And while Enji has never outright attacked humans, he had strictly forbidden his children from ever visiting the surface.

*Not that his ridiculous rules have stopped me so far.*

Touya's fin beats thoughtfully against the water before he finally makes his decision, following the undeniable pull of the unknown toward the ship with the giant exploding lights.



Aboard the royal ship, *Fierce Wings*, Prince Takami Keigo claps along with the sailors fiddling and singing and generally butchering their way through a popular shanty. The men grin at his involvement, and Keigo smirks at the bawdier lines that his adopted family would have been aghast to hear, enjoying the freedom to be himself.

Overhead, fireworks flare and boom, lighting up the darkened sky with brilliant hues of red and gold and blue—the royal colors of his house. Heralding their return to port and Keigo's birthday, all in one.

He rather wishes it were just the birthday they were celebrating, but he keeps that bit to himself as men pat his back in congratulations and laud his willingness to work amongst the crew throughout their voyage.

"It's the least I could do," Keigo stammers when one man claims that without the prince's speed in catching his lifeline, he would have been a goner for sure.

More cheers and mugs of grog are raised to that, and the next shanty starts up with gusto, this one clearly written for Keigo, detailing his many adventures and achievements over the past two months at sea.

The sixteen-year-old flushes, a grin pulling at his lips. Never in his life has he been so thoroughly praised or celebrated. By far the closest thing he'd ever heard to the heaps of well-wishes were his adoptive parents congratulating each other on making a fine choice of heir, despite his common blood.

Remembering them freezes his smile in place. He'll be seeing them either tonight, if they are able to dock, or on the 'morrow, where they can interrogate him about the outcomes of his mission.

"Attention men, attention," a tired voice calls over the decks, and the sailors calm their music and their singing long enough to let Mera Yokumiru approach Keigo. The aide's tired eyes and slumped shoulders hadn't been invigorated at all by the jovial atmosphere, but there's a certain energy to him when he lifts up a box for all to see. Keigo just isn't sure he *likes* what an energetic Mera means for him.

"The royal family has requested that I present our prince with his gift on his sixteenth birthday, should we not be home soon enough for them to do so themselves," Mera intones solemnly. Then he meets Keigo's eyes and lowers himself to one knee, box proffered up for Keigo's attention.



"Your majesty," the aide invites, tone prompting Keigo forward. Reluctantly, he approaches and opens the gift, eyes catching on a swath of crimson fabric.

Oh, yes. He might've expected this.

"It is the mantle worn by the heir apparent, when he has finally secured a betrothal worthy of his station!" Mera announces to much applause, as Keigo pulls the heavy fabric from the box, letting it spill from his hands until the end hits the rough wood of the deck.

*Ah, Keigo thinks ruefully. And by morning, everyone in the kingdom will know that I am betrothed. No chance of me discussing it with their majesties first, of course.*

"Aye, does that mean this jaunt was a successful one?" One of the sailors bellows, inciting even more cheering. Keigo forces on another grin and hides his fisted hands in the folds of fabric.

"Yes, sir!" he calls, knowing what answer he is expected to give. "Negotiations with our neighbors for the princess's hand in marriage were successful. And of course you're all invited to my wedding in the spring!"

Mera shoots him an annoyed glance at that, but Keigo pretends not to see. If he's to be forced into a marriage that he does not want to a woman that he does not love, then he can invite whoever he pleases. It's only fair.

More fireworks boom and crackle overhead, obviously in celebration of the news, and Keigo fixes his eyes on the cape in front of him. It would be rude not to put it on. Would go against protocol.

He's not sure if it's the weight of the fabric or the weight of its meaning that makes it rest so heavy across his shoulders, but Keigo does it anyway—clasping it under his chin with a clink that sounds like a manacle sliding into place. All to more cheering and brilliant fireworks.

Except. Except that last flash of light didn't come with a bang. Not until several seconds later.

"Storm 'ho!" The lookout crows. "Coming up from the aft—captain, it looks like a bruiser!"

Keigo joins the heads that turn to the back of the ship, and sees another fork of lightning flash across the churning clouds.

Thunder booms right behind it this time, much closer to hand, and the sailors scatter under the captain's orders to batten down the hatches and reef the sails. It's controlled chaos as the storm roars up on them with the ferocity of a true typhoon.

Keigo jumps at the opportunity to assist, hauling himself up the rigging with a speed hampered only by the cape he'd nearly forgotten about. It's too much trouble to unclasp by the time he's halfway up the mainmast, so he doesn't bother—simply takes up the nearest line and starts hauling in the sails while blinking water from his eyes as the heavens open up.

Lightning crackles around them, huge sheets of it turning night into day. Keigo's stomach lurches as the ship dips into an enormous trough, the waves finally catching onto the tumult being wrought across the sky.

Something enormous and blinding hits the mizzenmast, deafening in noise and magnitude, and Keigo's whole world tips along with the ship, which keels into the waves like a wounded animal. Men are screaming and clinging on for dear life, and it's through ringing ears that Keigo hears the call for the men to take cover.

He wonders why until a moment later when the front hold of the ship explodes, and Keigo realizes the lightning strike must have lit the remaining fireworks.

The ship sways on the mountainous waves and gives a fatal crack, and the captain bellows up for them to get into the long boats; to abandon ship. Keigo's boots hit the deck alongside the rest and his own voice rises in command for each man to seize a boat and *go*.

He lingers though, making sure every sailor has made it down to safety, sharp eyes tracking across the flaming and shattered deck to account for all the men aboard. It's how he sees Mera's ash blond head nearly buried underneath the tattered sail and broken boom of the mizzenmast.

"Your highness!" One of the sailors calls behind him, but Keigo is already moving, fleet feet nearly flying over the debris in an attempt to reach his aide. Like the man or not, Keigo is *not* going to let him die.

"C'mon, Mera," he huffs, dragging soaked canvas aside, splinters from the mast breaking off in his hands as he digs to get the man free. "You're supposed to be *my* aide, ya know."

"And y-you're supposed to have lost the accent, your highness," the man wheezes back, his rain-streaked face ashen in the light of the fire. Keigo feels a grin tug at his lips despite himself—at least the man is alive enough to criticize.

"Let's get you out of here. Can you move?" He grunts, shoving a half-shattered crate off the man's ankles. He offers his aide a bleeding hand.

"Yes, sir," Mera affirms, taking Keigo's hand with his own. And with that, Keigo hauls him out of the wreckage and slings the aide's arm over his shoulder, carrying him toward the railing where the boats are being lowered.

"Just a little further," Keigo pants, blinking rainwater from his eyes and trying to keep his balance as the boat tips and jolts under his feet. He can see the sailors gesturing him closer from the railing, one of the boats remaining to take him and Mera aboard. They're so close, he can see the whites rimming the men's wide eyes.

Then there's a loud creak followed by a terrible *snap*, and Keigo can see enough horrified expressions for him to realize something's wrong. He shoves Mera toward the men with all his might and then—

—then something hard and unforgiving slams into the side of his head, and the world goes black.



## ***Several Minutes Earlier...***

Touya watches the ship continue to launch explosives into the air, apparently trying to... attack the sky? Perhaps the humans think they can fight off the storm that is creeping nearer?

*If they had the Trident, maybe they could do it,* Touya thinks as he swims closer, circling beneath the wooden hull while searching for a way to see what is happening above. Fortunately, he finds it in a handful of rungs poking from the side of the ship that lead up to a narrow ledge. Climbing them pulls his body from the water and makes him feel heavy in a way that he never does underneath the waves. But it's worth it to see the commotion happening on board.

Dancing feet pound into the wood and music and laughter ring through the air as he watches from the openings through the railing. Men seem to be having the time of their lives, cavorting under the cascade of brilliant lights still exploding into the sky. Touya's eyes are wide as he takes in the sight, never having seen such mirth and enjoyment concentrated into one spot. Even at his father's lavish balls, there was never such a festive atmosphere.

An atmosphere that seems to revolve around one member of the party—a young man in a tan uniform, who grins and talks with the sailors with an air of confidence and ease. His golden hair reflects back the colors lighting up the air overhead, and his eyes shine like the coins Touya so often finds at the bottom of the sea.

The grin is what draws him in the most though, and he scoots closer to the opening, scales scraping lightly against the wood he's balanced on.

*He's so pretty,* Touya thinks wonderingly. To hear his father talk about humans, one would think them a barbarian race of fanged monstrosities. But *this* human...

This human glides through the crowds with authority and grace, laughter and poise. Tan cheeks bunch into a broad smile at one man, and then flush at the words of another. Touya wonders, with a thudding heart, what the man could have said to bring such a color to the other's cheeks.

At that moment, the ship rocks with a much stronger wave, and Touya's bandaged arm bangs into the barnacle-encrusted wood. A sharp hiss escapes him at the fresh throbbing through his injuries, and he glances down to assess the damage.

But his eyes don't linger on the red-stained seaweed for long. Instead, his gaze shifts to his tail, hanging off the little ledge with the tips brushing the waves below. Dark turquoise scales shimmer under the brilliant lights from above, casting back an almost rainbow effect as he shifts and falls with the waves. Pretty, certainly, but not human in the slightest.

Swallowing roughly, Touya's eyes track back to the bandages wrapped around his limbs. The one on his arm had come loose with the impact, and beneath the smear of blood, he can see the wrinkled mass of scar tissue from years of magical backlash carved permanently into his skin.

*Even if I had legs...* he thinks solemnly, not even bothering to finish the thought.

A sudden lull in noise from the deck draws Touya's attention back to what's happening, and he sees a man kneeling in front of the golden boy, presenting him with a gift of some sort.

Snippets of the conversation carry over to him with the wind picking up, and Touya listens intently to hear if the name of the man is said. But no, the only address he catches is *your majesty*, which sends his heart thudding again.

On the one hand, he is royalty himself. On the other, so is Enji.

*He doesn't act like Enji does though*, he thinks, watching the young man taking the brilliant red fabric from the box with an air of near-reluctance. There's no blatant pride or cold disdain in his features. Only acceptance, which is something Touya understands all too well.

A noise sounds in the distance, and Touya cocks his head to listen. What sounds like a distant boom echoes across the waves again, and this time he catches a distant flicker of light as well. Nothing like the brilliant flares of colorful light still blasting over the ship, but cold and deadly—like the light that comes from the Trident when Touya wields it.

The next wave that hits the ship rides high enough to submerge Touya's entire tail, and he glances back at the humans to see if any of them have noticed the change. However, it's apparent that they're too caught up in the festivities, their staggering across the rocking deck laughed off as a side effect of the sloshing drinks in their hands.

Part of Touya wants to warn them, or at least the golden young prince, that they're in danger but he hesitates, years of internalized fears and prejudice freezing him in place.

"Storm 'ho!"

The call is clear and loud, and immediately the ship's humans spring into action, crawling all over the ship and doing inexplicable things with the big cream fabrics above the deck. Touya watches with his heart in his throat as the prince scales the ropes faster than anyone else, surefooted and relentless as he goes higher and higher.

It's probably Touya's unwavering gaze that prevents him from noticing the way the storm swells around them, but he definitely isn't prepared for the violent blast that strikes the front of the ship. It hits so hard that the ship lurches and Touya tumbles from his ledge and into the water.



Submerging into the waves again is like waking from a dream, and Touya shakes his head vigorously to clear it of his thoughts. Above him, the keel of the ship is still visible, but what's the purpose of observing at this point? The humans will either survive the storm, or they will become bones for him to sift through at the bottom of the sea. It should make no difference to him what the outcome is, especially as he has his own troubles to worry about.

Still, he lingers, watching the ship pitch and sway above him and hearing another muffled *boom* from overhead. For the life of him, he can't explain the desire to see the humans survive. To see that golden prince, with his resigned acceptance of yet another burden, come out of this *alive*.

Something splashes into the waves next to him—a piece of the ship—and Touya's eyes widen in fear. If the ship is sinking, there's little chance of the humans surviving without it. It's not as if they have tails to rely upon.

He darts to the left as another shaft of wood pierces through the surface, and then lets his head breach the waves, where he's immediately assaulted with fresh water stinging against his cheeks and a sweltering heat pouring off of the ship, which is lit up against the black of the night.

Men are shouting—calls of "*your majesty!*" ringing out across the water. Touya can see their silhouettes against the bright heat, but they flinch back when another wave crests over the sinking ship, nearly sweeping them into the black sea below.

Something *does* fall over the side, and it's only the flash of bright red that allows Touya to place what it is. Without further thought, he dives.

Dodging the debris and gritting his teeth, Touya beats his tail hard as he follows the prince down into the depths, the other obviously weighed down by the cape billowing out like a cloud of blood around him. When Touya reaches him, he's dismayed to see there *is* a small cloud of blood coming from his temple, and his bright eyes are shut tight. Touya's muscles strain as he wraps his bandaged arms around the prince's chest and struggles toward the surface.

It's difficult though, with the weight pulling them down. No sooner has Touya's head broken the surface with a gasp rattling out of his lungs, than he and his passenger are pulled back under by the force of the stormy waves.

Frustrated, Touya dips below the surface and yanks at the clasp around the prince's neck, snapping the delicate metal in his desperation. The weighty fabric immediately sinks into the ocean, and once more Touya hauls the human above the waves, desperate to get him into the open air.

With hair soaked and clinging to pale cheeks, the prince looks somehow smaller than before, but a weak cough shakes his chest, which speaks to his strength of will. Touya's tail beats hard and steady to keep them above the sea line and he pulls the human to his chest and thumps him hard on the back.

A louder cough sounds in his ear, followed by a pained groan, and Touya's shoulders sag in relief. The human is alive—alive enough to be making noises.

Now, what to **do** with him, he thinks, feeling wet fabric scratch against his mangled bandages. He winces, but doesn't loosen his hold on the cold body pressed against his own.

*Cold... he needs warmth. Land.* Touya closes his eyes, letting his senses sharpen, letting them pull him toward the place where the call of the sea is weakest.

They're close. And Touya can make the swim, he thinks.

Mumbling breath ghosts over his ear, and Touya nearly jerks in surprise, turning his head to gaze at the golden prince, whose eyes are barely open.

"Th..nkgyu," the boy whispers hoarsely, cheek smushed leadenly into Touya's shoulder, distorting the words. Hazy golden eyes trace Touya's face, and he feels inexplicably ashamed for the scars that distort his features. Then it catches up with him that a *human* is looking at him. At Touya, a *merperson*.

*He better not remember this,* Touya thinks, torn between regret and fear, gazing back into those golden eyes, which slip closed after another moment or two. A small blessing that feels rather like a curse.

"Get ahold of yourself," he mutters into the rain-soaked air, beginning to scoop at the water with his tail, building up momentum to carry both of them to shore. "Just get him to safety quickly. You can do that. Then you can go home."

Still, with the comfortable weight of the human pressed so close and the memory of those grateful golden eyes peering up into his own, the swim to the sandy beaches feels like an eternity that he doesn't want to end.



The first sense to return is Keigo's hearing, carrying with it the steady thump and rush of waves beating against the shore. It's a familiar sound—a constant and lulling symphony that he's heard from his window all throughout his youth.

Not so normal is the feeling of water splashing up along his calf in a rush that can only be the tide, as it recedes away almost as quickly as it had appeared. Salt air tickles at his stinging nose, and bright light beats against his crusty eyelids.

Someone is stroking hair from his forehead, fingertips gentle and curious. It's that final sensation that gets Keigo to pry his eyes open.

Red hair is haloed by the light of the sun, appearing almost on fire along the feathered edges, and bright turquoise blue eyes peer down at him, distant and contemplative. Keigo has never in his life seen eyes that blue outside of the clearest oceans.

Wow, he thinks, heart beating against his suddenly tight throat.

Underneath those stunning, sparkling eyes, though... are ragged wounds. Keigo had once seen the family's chef suffer a burn wound when being too clumsy with

the oven. The puckered and purpled skin along this boy's jaw and under-eyes looked awfully similar.

The boy's fingers trace across his cheek bone, and Keigo shivers, despite feeling almost too warm.

"Who..?" He tries, his voice rough from inhaling seawater.

The boy starts, blinking rapidly before refocusing on Keigo with wide eyes. When he notices Keigo is watching him, he snatches his fingers away and props himself up on his elbows, pulling back and away almost too fast for Keigo's confused brain to track.

"Wait," he croaks, sand-crusted fingers reaching weakly for the boy's wrist.

But the boy clambers back out of reach entirely, his tail splashing into the water as the next rush of waves crash into the shore.

*Tail?* Keigo thinks, squinting into the sunlight sparkling off the water, wondering if he'd seen incorrectly. Throbbing behind his left ear really doesn't help his thought process, but he *can't* have imagined something like that, right?

"...*Your Highness!!*" a distant voice calls as Keigo struggles up onto his elbows, sand crunching under his weight. An especially loud splash catches his eye, and he swears he sees the tip of a deep blue tail flick into the air before disappearing beneath the waves.

"Prince Takami!" The voice calls again, much closer this time, and Keigo recognizes it as the voice of his aide, Mera, though he sounds more ragged than the last time they'd spoken on the ship.

*On... the ship? Didn't... didn't something happen?*

Memories rush back to him, and he lets his aching eyes fall closed for a moment, just to process the flashing images. The ship had gone down, and so had *he*.

*Which means... I should be dead right now.*

Except for the boy with the red hair and sea-blue eyes, who had evidently saved him. Knock to the head or no, there's no other possible explanation for him popping up on the shore, *alive*, after he'd gone into the water completely senseless. Not unless someone had pulled him from the depths.

*How though? I would know him if he were a member of the crew. No way could I forget those eyes or those scars.*

He can hear Mera's tread kicking up sand in his rush to reach his prince, but Keigo doesn't turn to look at him. His eyes are focused on the glittering ocean, where the boy had disappeared.

*I will find you,* he promises himself. *You saved my life, and I didn't even get to thank you.*

"Oh, your highness, it's a miracle," Mera wheezes, and Keigo looks up to see the aide with an expression of infinite relief etched into his features. Far more expressive than he'd ever been before the journey, for sure.

*Surviving a storm like that—maybe he's decided life's too short to be so rigid,* Keigo thinks, eying the hand that Mera extends to him.

"The men?" he asks, slapping his sandy palm into the other man's, accepting the help up. He does *not* expect the near-teary expression when he looks into his aide's face.

"They'll live," Mera says with a thick voice. "And so will I, thanks to you."

Keigo blinks in utter surprise when Mera sinks to a knee and bows his head.

"Anything you need, your majesty," Mera swears hoarsely. "You have my allegiance above all others."

*He didn't get to thank me either, I suppose,* Keigo thinks, swallowing hard. He stares down at the ash blond head bowed before him, then flicks his eyes to the sparkling waves.

"There... there may be one thing you can help me with," he says, watching Mera's haggard face turn up to face his. "If you truly mean 'above *all* others'." He lets the import of those words hang in the air, and the aide's grey eyes sharpen.

"Anything you need," he repeats, voice clear and final. Keigo smiles and offers his hand to the aide in turn, hauling him to his feet.

"Then we have work to do. There's going to be some rumors spreading about a successful engagement that we need to stop, and..."

"And?" Mera prompts when the prince takes a moment too long.

Keigo smiles out at the sea, hoping his rescuer can somehow feel his vow, "And we have a boy we need to find."



Worse than feeling it, Touya *hears* the promise. Hidden behind the rocks as he is, it's hard not to catch the voices that carry over the water. And with his heart racing against his ribs, he realizes that... the prince will never find him as he is. After all, humans can't survive beneath the waves like merfolk can.

*He'd need to grow a tail,* Touya thinks, letting his head smack against the rocks behind him, scraping slightly with the swell of the waves around him. He snorts when he imagines introducing his father to a once-human. *That* could only end in tears.

But... but if *Touya* grew legs...



He could meet the prince again *and* he could escape his overbearing father all in one fell swoop.

Touya presses a hand against his chest, trying to quell the soaring terror and hope pulsing through him. His fingers catch on the terrible burns that are mapped across his skin, though, and he realizes that even if he could stand on the sands with the prince and look him in the eye... the prince would likely flinch away when he saw just how damaged Touya was.

The thought causes him to sink beneath the surface, the energy leaving his body in one painful blow.

*Only the Trident would be powerful enough to both give me legs and heal me, and it's not like **that's** an option,* he thinks, eyes burning. Then his spine straightens.

It's not the *only* option, actually. The Sea Witch Ujiko might also be able to help him.

Beating his tail lightly against the water, Touya risks popping his head above the waves and peeking at the shore once more. And though they're distant now, he can still see the golden hair and the sure gait of the prince—purpose seeming to give him more energy than before.

The thought of his siblings crosses Touya's mind, but with Fuyumi and Natsuo relatively safe, and Shouto's imminently stronger connection to the Trident, Touya doubts they would miss him at all. In fact, with the stinger removed from his side, Enji might even become less hostile.

*They don't need me,* Touya realizes. *But **he** did. He would have died without me.*

*And I... I want to know what it might be like. To be a part of his world.*

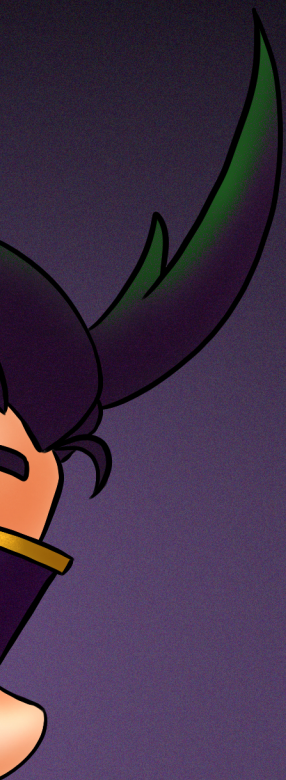
Decided, Touya lets himself slip beneath the glittering waves. Heart thrumming with the possibilities of escaping into a brighter future.











SP20



















# It's Been a Real Slice

A *Hercules* AU by Frankie in collaboration with Ibluze

As a child, Izuku would snuggle up next to his mother

near the hearth and listen to her tell stories of powerful gods and extraordinary heroes of the time. The fire-light would flicker warmth on her face as she'd tell in a hushed whisper of how the leader of the gods, All Might, had created mountains and valleys by pounding his mighty fists into the earth, how he'd banished the god of destruction and avarice, All For One, to the depths of the underworld.

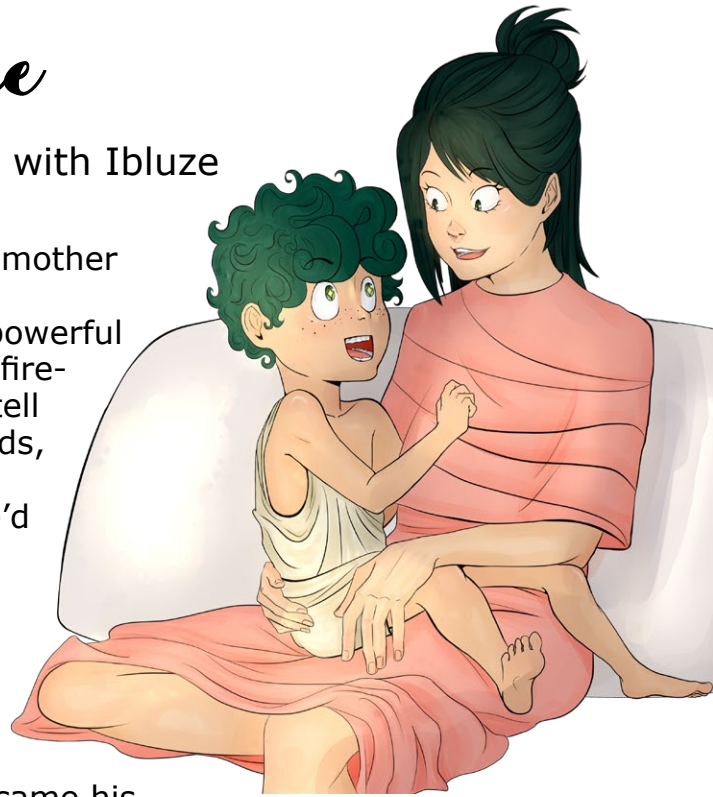
Izuku loved hearing these stories of legend. It made him want to be a hero too, though he feared as he got older that he may be too weak, too talentless, too ordinary to do anything heroic. The older he got, the more this became his reality. Though he'd done what he could to be kind and just to his neighbors and garner his physical strength, he was a mere mortal fated to live a normal life.

This changed on the day of the fire. Fifteen years old, Izuku had been waiting outside the forum for his mother to finish her shopping, idly leaning against their cart. Then he heard screams of terror and saw black smoke billowing from the forum's center. Without thinking, Izuku had rushed in to help. He was able to lead the able-bodied and uninjured out of the fire, including his mother, whose hand he held tightly as they rushed through the smoke and cinder.

But someone was missing. A woman was yelling for her daughter, whom she'd lost in the scuffle. Izuku ran through the forum once more and found the little girl with her leg trapped under a pillar. In a panic, he had tried lifting it up, using every ounce of strength he had. It didn't work. He tried and tried, each time praying for strength to save just one more life.

And that's when the gods got involved.

Izuku felt a jolt of something electric course through his veins and suddenly had the strength of fifty men. He lifted the pillar into his arms, rolled it away with a heave, and retrieved the girl. When Izuku emerged from the smoke with her,



he was met with ringing applause. It was like every legend he'd heard from his mother, but instead of feeling pleased, Izuku was confused. What happened to him and why?

He finally got his answers at night when the big kahuna himself, All Might, appeared to him in an earth-shattering crack of thunder. The mighty god commended a shellshocked Izuku on his bravery and told him that his heroic act convinced him to make Izuku a successor of his inhuman powers, including super strength. All he had to do was become a renowned hero in Greece in order to prove his worthiness to the gods to take his inheritance; a place in Mount Olympus.

This, of course, turns out to be much easier said than done.



Five years later, Izuku is wandering around the plains of Greece with the Nemean Lion when they both catch a whiff of a dreadful odor in the air. It smells truly ghastly, like something that recently emerged from the Underworld itself, with the body-tingling acidity of said thing left in the sun for way too long. Izuku covers his nose and mouth with one hand, the other reaching to soothe the lion next to him, who has raised his great head and bared its teeth in the direction of the odor. Izuku scans the grove of oaks surrounding them. There's nothing to indicate danger, but the smell has Izuku thinking otherwise. He feels the red lion's fur turn to pins and needles under his hands, the lion hardening up his body, his abilities on standby for a fight.



"That's trouble, huh, Kiri? Let's go see what's going on," Izuku says.

The deeper into the oak grove they go, the stronger the smell gets. Izuku's not sure if he's prepared himself to face a monster with this kind of scent before. He'd been told all about gorgons and druids and chimeras and all sorts of horrible beasts he may encounter in his journey, but if Izuku had to guess, they all probably didn't care much for hygiene.

Then Izuku hears something. Mingled yells travel through his ears, as well as an unfamiliar sound almost like a huge crash of waves on a rocky shore. Just under the terrible stench, Izuku smells...

"Smoke?" Izuku breathes out loud.

At the sound of another crash, Izuku and Kirishima break into a run simultaneously. As they speed towards where the yells are louder and the smell is stronger. Izuku sees a clearing just ahead and they stop just behind a cluster of trees, staring through the gaps and breathing heavily.

There it is. The thing that smells so badly that it makes Izuku's large eyes sting with tears at its proximity. A *mound of sludge*? Izuku thinks, crouching down next to Kirishima, his eyes glaring something intense at the thing. It is huge and green and *moving*, easily double the height of two men, dripping appendages reaching out towards a man who Izuku sees scrambling ahead through a rocky river.

"Oi! You got something in your ear, you rancid cretin?" the man yells, reaching the other edge of the river and standing proud on its bank, chest thrust out and heaving. Izuku notices that his arm is thrown over his mouth and nose to cover the smell. It's not, however, muffling his voice at all when he continues, "I *said* there isn't a chance in shit I'm going to him!"

Izuku is shocked when he hears a low, rumbling chuckle emit from the pile of sludge. A slit at the top of the mud pile opens wide as it *speaks*.

"Katsuki... you knew... the deal..."

"Well I'm working on it on my own so just tell your *precious boss* that he's just going to have to—"

Whatever it's boss will have to do, Izuku does not hear as the creature flings itself across the river with surprising speed, its body liquifying and clearing the running water. It engulfs the man called Katsuki in a huge, nauseating slurry, then rises up immediately afterwards, retaking its original creature-shape and pulsing grotesquely in its middle as Katsuki struggles beneath.

Izuku had been taught to assess a situation clearly before charging in. This is a creature he'd never heard of, one that looks hard to kill with just his fists. But, as he sees the man's head disappear underneath acrid green slime, Izuku's body moves on its own. He sprints from his hiding place in the trees, nose crushed under his raised forearm. Kirishima growls after him, a warning by Izuku's senses, but he knows his companion will soon follow.

Feet pounding the dirt beneath him and head dizzy from the lack of air, Izuku feels the hairs on the back of his neck stick straight up as he crosses the freezing cold riverbank and forces his way towards the conglomerate of man and monster. As he looks up at the creature, who seems not to notice him, and tries to figure out a way to penetrate the sludge, the man named Katsuki breaks the surface, emerging with matted hair and screaming expletives.

"Holy Underworld ever-living—this is fucking disgusting! Ever hear of a bath?"





Izuku stops at the bank of the river, his toga sopping wet, and watches a sputtering Katsuki strain his neck this way and that, trying to free himself. The sludge doesn't seem to make any moves to cover him again and a satisfied groan emits from it, apparently pleased with a successful capture. As it starts to inch away from the bank and towards the hills beyond the forest, Katsuki opens his mouth to say something else snarky, no doubt, but he freezes as his gaze locks onto Izuku. His confusion is momentary, however, his red eyes quickly sharpening into a piercing stare.

"And what are you looking at?" Katsuki says, flicking his gaze away from Izuku and twisting his neck with apparent effort.

"Uh?" Izuku would have probably laughed at Katsuki's scowl of frustration as he tried to extricate himself from the monster if the situation didn't seem so dire. It's a little rich that he has to explain himself in this situation, but Izuku tries to speak clearly through the crook of his elbow.

"I'm Izuku. I'm... here to help?"

The guy clicks his tongue, eyes roving over Izuku's muscular frame before looking past him with a resigned sigh.

"I'm fine," Katsuki grunts. "Move along."

Almost instantly, Katsuki gives a throaty, wheezing cough, like his body is trying to expel his poisoned guts as a defense mechanism. Izuku finds himself stifling an unconscious laugh again, succeeding only because he's covering his nose and trying not to breathe in more of the sludge's putrid stench.

"I'm sorry, what was I thinking?" Izuku says. "You are clearly handling this."

"Fucking right."

"So. I'll leave you alone now."

"Good."

Izuku is stunned, so much that he almost stops in his tracks. In the few years he'd been travelling the countryside, he hadn't met anyone who didn't want help. The road so far had been filled with people who needed him, so much so that it made his job seem very simple: save people, hunt monsters. Combine that with his inherited strength, how much more complicated could it get?

Very, was the apparent answer, as Izuku studies Katsuki's face for signs of further distress. Surprisingly, the monster still hasn't seemed to notice him, and again, Izuku can't help thinking for a third time that this would be highly amusing if it also wasn't so damn pitiful. Other than wriggling around helplessly and the occasional retch of his throat at the smell, Katsuki does appear to be unharmed. Along with the fact of the sludge moving at a snail's pace towards the hills, Izuku wholly cannot help the laughter that bubbles out of his throat. Katsuki whips his head around to glare at him again.



"Thought you were leaving, shithead," Katsuki growls, crimson eyes gleaming something mean. At this point, Izuku wouldn't be surprised if the guy started foaming at the mouth.

"It was sarcasm."

"You got a hero complex?"

"What? No, this... *creature* is taking you somewhere against your will, so I want to help."

"How?" Katsuki has stopped struggling now, resigned to his fate and looking highly disinterested in the conversation.

"I'm kind of strong?"

"Oh yeah? Show me."

Izuku now fully stops in his tracks. "What?"

"Show. Me," Katsuki repeats, a smug smile curling his lips.

Izuku huffs, wondering very much why he even wanted to bother with this. He'd met a few unsavory people in his lifetime, had dealt with gods sending all kinds of creatures at him to test his strength, but anyone who'd ever wanted or needed help from him had been polite at the very least.

"Alright," Izuku says, taking a deep breath of somewhat fresh air before lowering the arm covering his face and rolling his shoulders back. "I'll show you."

And without much more warning, he plunges both arms into the sludge, feeling around for Katsuki's body.

"OI, WHAT THE—"

Izuku inhales a fresh wave of stink, barely noticing Katsuki's screaming over the distressed groans coming from the toxic waste he's just dipped his hands into. Coughing, he pushes his forearms into the mud more deeply until his palms feel smooth, wholly human skin. It jumps slightly at his touch, and Izuku grabs onto what he believes is Katsuki's torso and *pulls*.

With a gut-wrenching squelching noise, Katsuki's body is freed from the monster almost a little too easily, splattering grime everywhere. In his grip, Katsuki is an absolute mess, hair still matted and now slightly dried in weird spikes, his arms and legs and toga absolutely drenched in stink, and his face contorted in an expression equal parts rage and shock. He seems otherwise unharmed, so, body check done, Izuku throws him over his shoulder like a giant ragdoll and runs in the opposite direction of the hills.

"YOU ABSOLUTE DINGBAT, WHAT THE HELL—"



"You told me to show you my strength, so I simply—"

"I THOUGHT YOU WERE EXAGGERATING, NOT ACTUALLY—"

"Ow, if you could just stop struggling—"

"LIKE *HELL*—"

"And here's our ride."

Izuku feels relieved as the ground shakes beneath him and he sees a flash of a red mane. Kirishima approaches them quickly, growling and sniffing Katsuki's ankles, to which Katsuki kicks at instantly. He throws Katsuki belly-down onto Kirishima's back and gets on behind him, holding onto Katsuki's reeking toga with one hand and grabbing onto Kiri's soft fur with another. Izuku looks back briefly, only to see the sludge monster sinking into a formless pool, bubbling sinisterly and shining in the afternoon sun.

"Let's go, Kiri," he yells over Katsuki. "I don't know what that thing's recovery time is."

Katsuki gives a grunt of surprise when Kirishima starts to move, and then is absolutely silent as they start to pick up speed. Izuku looks around as Katsuki rights himself on the lion's back. His face, which had been contorted with rage just seconds ago, is now open and excited like a child's. With the little that Izuku knows about Katsuki, Izuku finds himself drawn to this wild and wondrous energy. He watches Katsuki's hands as they pat Kirishima's fur gently and then dig into the lion's thick skin to grasp it tightly as Kirishima really picks up the speed. When Kirishima jumps over a riverbank, Katsuki gives a savage whoop of delight.

Izuku can't help but laugh at this, and Katsuki looks back at him, a smile still etched into the corners of his eyes and mouth. He turns his head to look at their surroundings, and then nods curtly.

"Okay, okay, we're far away from it now," Katsuki yells over the wind. "Let me off."

"You sure?"

"Yes, gods, just—"

"Alright." Izuku gives Kirishima a firm tap and the lion slows to a stop, kicking up dirt behind him with a flick of his tail. They've gotten to a clearing where Izuku can see the silhouette of tall columns and a large iron-wrought gate; the entrance to a nearby city.

Katsuki instantly slips off of Kirishima while Izuku gives Kirishima a pat of thanks. He stops to assess his own toga, which is flecked with dark sludge marks from rescuing Katsuki, before following the man as he stomps towards the city and away from Izuku.

"You looking for a reward?" Katsuki says, his gaze set firmly ahead of him.

"No. But what was that thing? I've never seen anything like it."

Katsuki stops. He looks around at Izuku, staring at him coldly. "I doubt you would have, golden boy. And I coulda handled that myself, you know."

Izuku crosses his arms and stares. "How?"

Katsuki smirks at the way his earlier question to Izuku has been turned on him. He says nothing, but reaches into the neck of his toga and reveals a sodden cloth purse. Reaching inside, he grabs something—a damp little pouch tied together with twine that Izuku could smell, a strong combination of charcoal and rotten eggs. He has no idea what exactly it's supposed to be, and he tilts his head at Katsuki in question.

"Black powder. Imported from the east," he says.

"What does it do?"

Katsuki shrugs. "Makes things go boom."

"What do you mean?"

"Like... an eruption? A crash? Boom." He pockets the thing again carefully, not minding Izuku as he gapes at Katsuki, now realizing that the smoke he smelled earlier must have been these little bags.

"You keep those around *your neck*?" Izuku says in disbelief. "And how were you supposed to use that when you were covered in that gunk?"

Katsuki huffs and turns back towards the city. "I gotta ignite them, they won't boom otherwise. And I would have figured it out. I've always taken care of myself and could have done so without your stupid freaky strength."

Izuku gazes at Katsuki's back, the slime from the monster caked on taut, muscled shoulders. There's something underneath the sneer that feels like a single wolf crying out for its family, and Izuku can't help but respond softly, "That sounds really lonely."

Katsuki stops at this, rounding on Izuku with a heavy roll of his eyes and stalking closer to Izuku. "You really are something, golden boy." He gets into Izuku's face, so they're almost nose to nose. His teeth are barred, and despite the smell from the mud, his breath is faintly sweet, like ambrosia.

"You think you know something about me because you helped me?" Katsuki whispers.

"No," Izuku says, backing away slightly and trying not to think about how Katsuki's eyes look like shining rubies up close. "I'm just saying. I get lonely sometimes, and I even have Kirishima with me. So travelling around by yourself must be..."

Izuku's voice dies out and something flickers in Katsuki's eyes. He draws back, crossing his arms and turning away from Izuku in an exaggerated huff.

"Sometimes," he grunts. "But it's better to be alone."

"I'm sorry you feel that way."



"It's fine. It's not *your* fault."

Izuku shrugs. "Still. I was going to head to the city. We could travel together if you like."

Katsuki clicks his tongue. "And have an overgrown man-child and his weird lion hanging around me 24/7? No, thanks. I have shit to do, and I don't need to be held up by dead weight."

Izuku feels his shoulders slump at this. "Okay. But you can find me in the city. If you need me."

"What? Thebes is huge, and I'm just supposed to shout for you?"

Izuku shrugs. "I'm always there when people need help."

Katsuki levels him a stare at this, an utterly disbelieving stare that Izuku feels himself falling head over heels for.

"Right. Well, it's been a riot, golden boy." Katsuki gives him a mock salute. "See you around."

"See you," Izuku says, watching the sunset drench Katsuki's retreating form in orange light. He wants to stop Katsuki from walking away, but he clenches his hands into fists instead, digging his nails into his palms hard.





"Someone is not a people person," a voice says behind him. Izuku glances behind him to see that Kirishima has morphed into a human, pulling his own toga from the bag on Izuku's back and draping it over himself.

"He could have at least stuck around to see my human form," Kirishima continues. "Maybe he would have let us accompany him if he saw how manly I look!"

"Somehow, I doubt that."

Kirishima chuckles and steps around Izuku, hands running through his long red hair. He eyes the path Katsuki had taken towards the city.

"I wonder if we will run into him in the city," Kirishima continues. "That sludge monster seemed pretty keen on him. We'll just have to be vigilant, won't we? Maybe we'll see Katsuki again and he won't even need saving, wouldn't that be nice?"

"Yeah. Maybe."

In all of his travels through Greece and in his quest to live up to All Might's name and inheritance, Izuku had never met anyone who was in trouble and didn't want to be saved. He also hadn't met anyone who made him feel like this before. Izuku remembers the faces of everyone he's been able to save, and everyone he wasn't able to. But this is different. Izuku feels excited at the prospect of simply seeing Katsuki again, let alone helping him if—no, *when*—he needs him again. Something about that fiery personality makes Izuku think that Katsuki won't be without trouble for long.

*I guess we'll see,* Izuku thinks to himself briefly before letting Kirishima pull him towards the city's gates. He's ready for a bath and good night's rest as the sun settles beneath the horizon, stars and gods alike emerging through the blanket of night to twinkle above them.



Bow to the champion,  
the undefeated victor of  
my hatred and envy, my ire  
for liars who promised  
to save me, only  
to save the city.

Is it so bad to be so greedy?  
To only want your eyes,  
your smile, your arms curled  
around my waist, lifting only me  
and not the world?





# The Great Wide Somewhere

A *Beauty & the Beast* AU by Amaranthinecanicular

There is a story, and it goes like this:

Once there was a king, and a prince, and a knight. There was a sword that breathed only for the worthy.

The king was cruel; the prince was cursed. The knight was not yet a knight, but a stable boy, who came upon the sword of a hero long gone. Wielding both the sword and his pure heart, the stable boy broke the prince's curse. The prince deposed the wicked king, and within himself he found a purpose and peace he had never known. He called upon the stable boy, and to thank him for his bravery, his counsel, and his kindness, the boy was named a knight of the realm. At the prince's side the knight remained, loyal and steadfast, and together the Prince and the Knight watched over the kingdom together, for the rest of their days.

Once there was an exiled king, and there was a healing prince, and there was a brave, worthy knight.

And Bakugou Katsuki was not any of them.

And that's good. That's fucking *great*. He wants nothing to do with that fucked up family of royals, and he wants less to do with Deku. If it's a matter of worthiness, then he will prove he's good and god damn *worthy*. He is not a creature for sad, soft-eyes princes, or curses lifted by love. He is not for fairy tales. He is not like *Deku*. Bakugou is a creature for slaying monsters, and there is nothing more worthy than that.

Shortly after the bards put Deku's story to song and the song spreads across the land, Bakugou takes up his sword and sets out on a quest of his own.

He roves from town to town, a juggernaut, putting down ghouls and goblins wherever he finds them. Most of them are just fairy stories, made big by small minds: the werewolf is a rabid dog. The ghosts are kids playing spook. The demons are bandits taking advantage of overactive minds. That's the problem with legends and stories and fairy tales—they always get things wrong. The ballad everyone fawns over doesn't mention how Deku's sword has another half, or how Bakugou now carries it strapped to his spine. And it doesn't mention the people who came calling on it shortly after.

Weeks go by, and then months, until finally, with winter biting his heels, he finds a village. It's a quaint little town. Provincial. And there is a story.

It's said that a ruthless beast ate the beloved young lord. It's said the beast is now holed up in the lord's manor, at the heart of the dark forest. It's said that if the



forest doesn't devour you, the monster surely will.

This tale is just as fantastical as all the others, probably riddled with inaccuracies, but there is a ring of truth in the fear. The fear is real.

As is the cursed forest that Bakugou strides into. The trees are the kind of depthless dark without detail, without shape, the trunks twisting together, and where the branches meet overhead, they become a tangled, many-tentacled thing. Through the gaps he can see the stars like eyes, accusing. It's said these woods are haunted. Bakugou has his doubts about that, but he can say with near certainty that this place is alive, and that it *menaces*, and that it *looms*, and that it *sees*.

Frankly, he's not impressed. There are worse things that have their eyes on Bakugou.

He scythes a small clearing, and takes a deep breath. The taste of winter on the air, the smell of the earth—they're both weaker than they were, which means he's going in the right direction. He lifts the sword and keeps going. As far as legendary weapons go, it doesn't look like much. Chipped and notched with cracks that propagate deeper than his eye can follow. Weathered by war and ravaged by time as though just one swing more will make it give up the ghost. But there's bone-strength in this blade. The will of something living that refuses to bend or bow or die. It cuts through anything because it chooses to be strong. It holds together because it refuses to break. It smells like nothing, which smells like magic, and it does not wake because it chooses not to wake for Bakugou. But it will.

Another swing, three more trees, and suddenly there's enough light to see his breath misting out before him. Bakugou has crossed into a river of moonlight: a thin, curving, barren stretch of land, with more trees a short leap across it. He wonders briefly what could have caused such a strange border—surely nothing natural—and then he decides that he doesn't care.

The divide is crossed with one stride. These trees are just as dark as the trees on the other side of the border, but there's a strangeness to them. They're thicker, taller, with thorns as long as his fingers. The trunks are braided together, grown up so close and tight that he can barely see through the branches. High above, the canopy curves away from him, as though shielding what's on the other side.

Bakugou takes a deep breath, and smells exactly nothing.

The heart of the forest. These trees are more than just trees—they're a gate. And behind them, now that he peers more closely, there is a house. A manor.

It's a fearsome thing. The cut-out silhouette is like a maw, the spires are broken teeth. It seems as dimensionless as the trees, a void blacker than the night sky.

"Turn back."

The voice is like a rockslide; Bakugou goes very still. A shape that he had taken for a turret detaches from the manor's silhouette, much closer than he expected. The shadow looks—wrong, somehow. Rougher, sharper than it should be.

Monstrous.

"Turn back," the shadow says again. It comes to rest beneath the overhang of the gate, just outside the moonlight. "I'm warning you."

"Oh, you're *warning* me." Bakugou sneers. "You must be confident if you're willing to look down on me like that. I'll make sure you regret it."

The shadow tilts to the side, looks past him. "You really did a number on the forest," it says. "It was trying to protect you, you know that?"

"*Protect me*. From what? You? You won't even come into the light." Bakugou side-steps, hunts for a better angle to assess the threat in front of him. The thing counters and fades back out of view. "*Fight me*, damn it."

"You know, I really want to? You might be a jerk, but at least you're straightforward. I respect that." Another step. Another fade. "Plus, you seem strong. And I haven't had a good fight in ages."

There is the sharp sound of stone striking stone, and then a spark: for just an instant, Bakugou sees two roughhewn fists, an axe blade jaw, stalagmite teeth. A pair of eyes catch the light, familiar but strange, like no living thing he's known. At once: Bakugou *has* to see this thing. He *has* to fight it. His blood is singing.

The thing says, "But as much as I want to, I really, really can't—"

Bakugou changes tack. "Thought you monsters were all too dumb to talk. Not that it makes a difference. I'll destroy you even if you *can* beg for mercy."

A grating sound—laughter, maybe. "Wow, you're a real piece of work, aren't you?"

"And you're a coward."

The laughter cuts out so sharply there is a ringing in the silence.

"What, you don't like being called a coward? Prove me wrong. Come out and face me."

The monster's eyes flash, and Bakugou realizes: not like a living thing at all. Like light catching on the polished facets of a precious stone.

"I never back down from a challenge," it says, "but this is for your own good. Last warning: turn back. If you come through those gates, you'll never leave."

"*Never*, huh?" Maybe the monster realizes its mistake. Maybe it starts to say so, but Bakugou speaks over it. "That sounds like a challenge to me. You better be able to back it up."

"Don't," warns the monster, but with one swing, the woven gate shears in two.

Bakugou leaps through the gash. He means to cleave the monster's head from its shoulders, but it throws up an arm, and for the first time since Bakugou took up the broken blade, it strikes a foe it cannot fell. The impact sings all through his bones. He feels alive.

It begins to rain.

Bakugou is thrown back. He lands on his toes; the grass is just starting to soften. He dives into another attack, and when the monster ducks, Bakugou uses the momentum to swing around and attack again. Again, the monster shields itself with an arm, and again the sword is held at bay. High above there is a crack of thunder that Bakugou feels all the way down in the earth.

"You move fast for a pile of rocks," he says. "Die!"

He sees exactly when it happens. When defensive becomes offensive—when the monster starts to enjoy it. Suddenly Bakugou is the one forced to dodge and parry. He takes measured steps forward, greater steps back, leads the monster slowly, slowly, out of the shadows—

It steps into the light.

He is a man—he is not a man. He is a creature in the shape of a man, carved from stone and roughly hewn, or else he is carved from crystal. His eyes glow true-red, like ruby or like garnet, or like they are lit from behind by a flame.

The awe stretches on for half a beat too long. Bakugou blocks the hammer fist as it comes for him, but his stance is off, and he lands hard on his back, gritting his teeth and squeezing his eyes shut as the air drives out of him. Rain pelts at his face and body, tries to weigh him down. He claws at the mud, prepares to lever back to his feet, and his eyes fly open—

The full round eye of the moon stares back at him. All those glaring stars. There is not a single cloud in the sky.

He shakes himself back to the present, but by then there is a stone fist smashing into his skull.



In Bakugou's dreams, he is running. He is running as though he has always been running, as though he can never stop, or else something will catch him. Someone.

There is no setting. He trips through a colorless backdrop, skinning his knees and cramping his side. Half of a legendary sword is in his hand, and there are so many hands. Hands looming out from the shadows, and from the ground, and from behind him. Fingers graze his ankles like tall grass. They're getting closer. They're tearing at his clothes. If he can just keep running—if he can just wake the sword—

But he is already caught. Because the sword is dead in his hand, and his hand is the hand that is chasing him, and there is no escape. There never was.

When he wakes, Bakugou is so relieved that for a full ten seconds he does not panic at all.

And then he really does, because *where the fuck is he*.

This is not his bed. These are not his clothes. The room, the armoire, the desk, the *side* desk, the silver tray and the cup of tea, still steaming—this is someone’s fucked up idea of a joke, or a trap, and he will not fall for it. He leaps to his feet, snatches up the sword where it was left leaning against the side table, and bursts out of the room into a long hall, lined high with windows and low with doors. He wasn’t unconscious long: through the windowpane the smattered mess of stars are still winking. Stupid. Letting himself get distracted like that was *stupid*. He knew there was magic at play, but he hadn’t thought the enchantment would be strong enough to bring a summer storm to a winter sky. It was a rookie mistake, and the throbbing welt on his temple can attest to it. Just like his captor’s mistake of letting him live.

He walks slow, and cautious, his bare feet cushioned by a thick rug that coughs up dust with every step. His breath heaves into dead air. There’s nothing living in this house—nothing human, anyway. He keeps an eye on the doors and the suits of armor posted between them. Some of them have seen war; others are decorative. Whoever wore them is gone now, but still he feels watched, like he did in the forest. It could be the manor itself. It could be the monster. Or it could be something else.

There is a creak behind him.

He swings the sword so fast that there isn’t even a spray of blood. A hand clangs to the floor at Bakugou’s feet. He blinks.

“Oh, that’s great!” wails the thing he took for a suit or armor. “Just spectacular, really. It’ll be sparking all *day*!”

There are three of them, the second and third bent double laughing at the first. They are not people. They are dolls in the shape of people, not unlike the monster, but where he was cut from the earth they are forged from metal—from different metals, each of them. They move like the windup toys that dance in a child’s treasure box, but there are no strings or springs to move them. The craftsmanship is delicate and masterful. Their eyes spin and spin.

Bakugou recoils. “What the hell *are* you?”

“Rude! What the hell are *you*?” says the yellow one—brass, maybe, or gold. It waves the sparking stub at the end of its arm. “How do you like being treated like a thing? Not very nice, is it?”

“The word you’re looking for is automatons,” says the silver one. There’s the ticking sound of clockwork behind its painted smile.

“Also cursed,” says the copper one, cheerfully. “I’m Ashido Mina. This is Sero Hanta, and this is Kaminari Denki.” She scoops up the gold hand and points at Bakugou with it. Cheerful puffs of steam lift away from her joints. “*You*, sir knight, are an intruder in our home.” As one, they gesture grandly at the unhappy manor, and Bakugou wonders if they practiced this. “But since Kirishima is so nice, he’s decided you can be our guest.”



They bow mockingly, and yeah, they definitely practiced this. Bakugou is tempted to chop the other hand, but instead he says, "Take me to the monster and I might let you live."

"Cool cool, so I rescind my guest vote!" whines the gold one. "The house agrees with me, and so does my severed hand. Sic 'em, house!"

The house creaks and rumbles in an impressive approximation of a great growling beast. Bakugou's approximation is better. The gold puppet yelps, which is gratifying, but the other two roll their eyes.

"Kirishima wanted to see you when you woke up, anyway," says the silver one, and forks a thumb at the nearest door. "He's in the kitchen. Ooh, if you give us your name, we could announce you, haven't done that in a while—or, yeah, you could ignore us and just march on in, that's cool too."

That is obviously what Bakugou is doing. He kicks open the door to the kitchen, except it doesn't lead to a kitchen, it leads to a war zone, and past the soldiers of towering china and stacked porcelain is the monster, stalking through it all.

He does battle with the pots and pans, charred over the stove, and piled high in the sink. He wrestles with the rusted hinges of drawers and pantries. There is a cloying, lingering over ripeness that hangs in the air like a chemical weapon, but maybe the monster doesn't need to breathe. And maybe stalking isn't the right word for what he's doing. Lurking is probably it. Or something. He notices Bakugou.

"Oh, hey! You're up! How are you feeling? That hit was nasty." The cliff face of his expression changes, though Bakugou can't read how. It's a bunch of *rocks*. "I'm sorry about that. I got caught up in the moment, thought you were going to dodge. I should've been more careful." Another shift—is he smiling? "You're really good. I can't remember the last time I had such a fun spar."

"Spar."

The monster turns back to the pantry. "I was trying to rustle up some dinner for you, but honestly it's been so long since any of us had to eat that I can't really remember where everything is or how to actually make the meal, y'know, *edible*—"

"We weren't *sparring*."

The monster turns. He sees something in Bakugou's expression, he must, because he straightens to a towering seven feet. He opens his posture. It faces Bakugou head on.

"You're right. Let's be direct about this. You came to kill me because you think I'm the monster that killed the lord of this manor. That's the story, right? That's not what happened—"

"I don't care what happened. You're a monster. I'm a knight. You do the math."

"Okay, you want another fight. Sure. Can we not do this in the kitchen?"

A low growl builds in Bakugou's throat. The monster huffs.

"Fine! Whatever. At least let me put some stuff away first. We can have dinner after."

Puttering. That's the word Bakugou was looking for. The monster was puttering around the kitchen before, and that's what he's doing now, as he shoves various cooking utensils back into cabinets and pantries. For some reason, that is absolutely the most infuriating thing about this whole situation, which has thus far included Bakugou failing to kill the monster, getting wounded by the monster, and getting abducted by the monster. But *this*, this is the last straw. Monsters do not *putter*—

All at once, the story clicks into place. Because that's what this is. Another *fucking* fairy tale.

"You're the dumbass lord that the dumbass villagers think got eaten."

"Yes," says the dumbass lord.

"*And* you're the dumbass monster that they think *ate* the dumbass lord."

"Yes," says the dumbass monster.

"And you're cursed, and the only way to break the curse is with *true love* or some shit."

"Wh—yes, wow, exactly. How did you know that?"

"Fucking *Deku*," growls Bakugou.

"I don't know who that *holy shit!*"

The monster is fast, Bakugou remembers that from the last fight, and his reflexes are good too: he drops low to avoid the arc of the blade, leaving a pyramid of cups in the path. The air explodes with ceramic shrapnel. Bakugou plants his foot and comes back around, and this time the monster does not dodge. He raises his arm and braces against the attack, and the force blows out the windows behind him. Wind whistles through the broken glass like a shriek of anguish, or of anger, or of pain.

"Quit hurting the house!" says the monster. "Why can't we just take this outside? You're a knight, where's your honor?"

They don't deserve Bakugou's honor, and they don't deserve a response. The monster growls, but instead of the counterattack Bakugou is expecting he throws himself backward—vaults above the sink and through the shattered window, too massive to make a clean getaway and tearing chunks of the wall like so much wet paper. Rain sprays Bakugou's face like blood from a wound, and he jumps through to follow.

Outside again, the manor is clearer now than they were. Whether it's because some of his tunnel vision has cleared, or because he's coming at it from the oth-

er side of the magic, Bakugou doesn't know. The grounds unfurl in gentle rolling knolls, tallgrass rippling in the rain and splashed silver by the moonlight. All around they're hemmed in by the dark ring of trees. Bakugou can't see where he entered only hours ago—there is no break in the treeline.

"You need to listen to me. You still don't have all the facts. Maybe we can work together to break the curse—" Bakugou is unrelenting, pressing him back back back. The tree gate is rapidly approaching. "Look, can you cool down for like, two seconds?"

"I'll cool down when you're *dead!*"

The monster takes the next hit, leans into it—there's a mighty, ringing *crack* of blade on stone. Sparks spit out at their eyes and Bakugou blinks rapidly. *Badass. "Die!"*

His aim is true, but the monster does not die. Instead he clasps the blade in both hands and for an instant, Bakugou thinks he will stop the strike dead. Instead he throws the trajectory, sending Bakugou stumbling several feet past him, and when he catches himself and heel-turns, his sword meets resistance on the backswing. At once his senses are assaulted by the scent of nothingness. He stops.

"What is this," he growls.

"What I was trying to tell you." The monster hasn't dropped out of his defensive stance. "The curse that turned me into—this, is the same reason I didn't want you crossing the border. Until the curse is broken, those within its bounds can't leave."

The weight of that settles on Bakugou's shoulders. His lips skin back from his teeth. "You trapped me here."

"We're all trapped here," says the monster, unimpressed by Bakugou's accusation. "And I tried to warn you. You didn't listen."

Bakugou looks at the sword in his hand, then at the snarled gate behind him. The lord-turned-monster, the puppets. Right. Just another part of the fairy tale. Of course.

The monster says, "I don't think the witch that did this meant for it to go this way. She wasn't in full control of her magic, so maybe there's a weak point in the barrier. I'm sorry this happened to you, but there's nothing we can do about it now. My name's Kirishima Eijirou. We should work together—"

"Nothing we can do," Bakugou repeats, and the monster goes still in the way things do when faced with something feral. He's right to. Wrath builds in Bakugou like a stormhead, roiling and racing across the sky, and his body shakes with the heat of it. The rain should be steaming off his skin. "Nothing we can do but break your curse, right? Nothing we can do but rope me into your asinine drama to save your sorry hide." He laughs, hoarse and unkind. "No chance in hell. Nothing *you* can do, maybe, but here's what I can do. I can kill you, and break the curse that way. How's that for happily ever after?"

"Yeah," the monster says, just as Bakugou lunges. He sounds resigned. "Sure, or we can just keep doing this."

They fight well into the morning, when the stars give way to crisp winter-blue sky and the summer rain does not give way to anything. They fight until Bakugou is on his last legs, until the blood pounding in his head drives out the pounding of his anger or the rain. He doesn't *flee*, he pulls a *tactical retreat*. Reassess, come back swinging. It still sears his ego.

The automatons scatter when he backs into the manor. The door to the bedroom still stands open, and he uses the last of his strength to drag his sorry carcass inside and bull the furniture into a barricade. Then he sleeps, shallow and restless, because if he goes too deep, he'll dream.



There is a story, and it goes like this: once there was a young lord, and a monster, and a knight. Of course there was a sword.

Except it turns out the lord *was* the monster, and when the knight arrived to slay it, he was tricked into the bounds of a curse, where, unless he could slay the monster and wake the sword, he would remain for the rest of his days. It's a stupid fucking story and Bakugou hates it.



He doesn't kill the monster that first day, or the second, though he tries. If the villagers' stories are to be believed, the thing has grown even *more* massive since the curse was first laid. Man-sized, they said. Ha. Man-shaped, maybe, if four limbs and two horns and a riot of canyon-red rock that could maybe pass for hair counts as man-shaped, sure. But *man-sized*? This thing is seven feet tall at least, and broad as a bear.

"Part of the curse," the monster explains on the third day, one unrefined earthen arm crossed in front of his face against Bakugou's blade. They've been at it for an hour, locked sword-to-arm for a quarter of that; Bakugou is drenched in sweat, every muscle bunched and burning, his palms scraping bloody against the grip. The pain is clean and crisp and he savors it. If nothing else, the beast always makes for a good fight.

"The longer I go without breaking the curse—" Bakugou's feet are planted so firmly that when the monster pushes him back in torturous, hard-won inches, his boots leave furrows in the earth. "—the more monstrous I become."

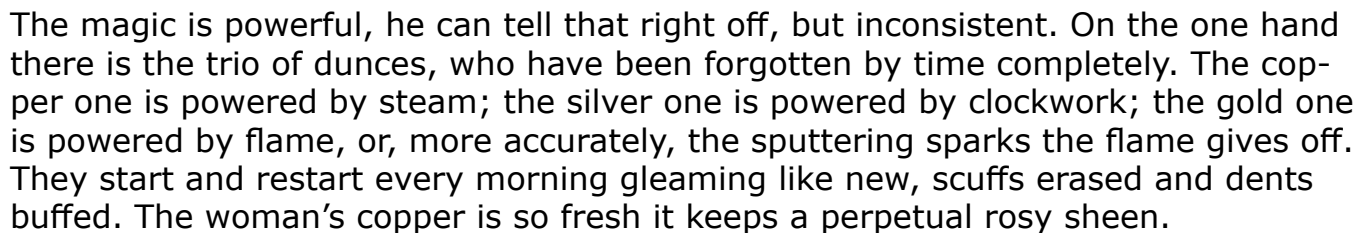
From this Bakugou siphons off a single truth: if he doesn't dispatch the monster soon, he'll just get stronger. Fine. Bakugou's up for the challenge.

He doesn't kill him that day, or the fourth or fifth days, and he doesn't kill him by the end of the week, if there is an end to it. There *is*, obviously, but time is strange here. It passes—he knows it passes. But it passes as though it only remembers to



"I think," says the copper one, tapping one slender and segmented finger to her chin with a sound like a bell, "I think we've been here ten years. That's how it feels, anyway, not that we look it. Nothing changes here. Not us, at least."

After that, Bakugou decides it would be a good idea to get a real feel for the magic here, and the threat it might pose to him. So, when he isn't actively hunting the monster, he explores.



That's it. The manor just—shuffles the rooms around. It's more of a prank than anything, and Bakugou *hates* it. Hacking the doors down helps, because the house

can't change rooms once he can see where he's going, but everything resets the next day and there the doors are, ready to fuck with him again.

Stranger still, and somehow worse, is that when he finally does get where he needs to go, the house is always waiting for him with a gift, as though it hadn't just spent an hour turning him around like a dumbass. A lit hearth, or cleaned and mended clothes, or *new* clothes, or shitty food and a decent cup of tea, which just makes the shitty food taste shittier. Bakugou thought he was above being insulted by a house, but apparently he was wrong.

Lastly, there's the greenhouse.

Bakugou knows fuck-all about the greenhouse, which is how he knows it's important. It's the only point of interest on the otherwise empty grounds, a small glass rotunda nestled behind the manor, opaque with humidity and the dark growing things inside. When the breeze changes, he can smell the nothingness coming off it. There's a sprawling garden on its borders, untamed and wild and overflowing with flowers and fruits and vegetables of all kinds. Every afternoon the bounty is different: root vegetables one day, squash on another, bushels of blackberries and blueberries and raspberries on a third. And every afternoon, without fail, the monster can be found tending it with painstaking care. Usually the automatons join him, though Bakugou can't fathom why. He's never seen any of them eat.

Once, while fighting, the monster said, "So, hey, for as long as you're here, the house is your home, but I'd like you to keep out of the greenhouse, okay? On your honor as a knight. It's a personal place."

Which obviously made Bakugou want to break into the greenhouse out of spite. He might have done it right then, but something strange happens when he looks at the greenhouse directly. He is filled to brimming with melancholy; all his energy, all his confidence, is sapped. More than anything else in this storybook gone wrong, that unsettles him. He decides to bust in if he doesn't kill the monster soon, but he's sure he will. As far as he's concerned, it's a foregone conclusion.

All of these things, the weather, the manor, the automatons, the greenhouse, the monster itself—they're all wound up in the same magic. Knotted by piano wire and pulled taut. It should be affecting them evenly, and in the same ways, but it's not. There are things that change and things that stay the same. Things that age and things that don't. Inconsistent—it fits with what the monster said about the witch being inexperienced.

All the same, the curse is binding. There's no secret solution, no loophole or back door. If Bakugou means to find his freedom, he knows what he has to do. The only way out is through.



Things would be easier if the monster were on the same page.

"For the last fucking time, we are not *sparring*."

It is absolutely not the last time. They are well into the second week, as far as the curse will let him perceive, and he isn't any closer to killing the monster now than he was upon arrival. The monster is difficult to fight because he's difficult to predict. He knows the proper footwork, and has a basic grasp of sword technique—thrust, parry, riposte—but it's the nature of his two best weapons that have led him to integrate his knowledge into a whole new fighting style that Bakugou is still learning to counter. It's fierce, up-close, aggressive. Impressive. Sloppy, simplistic, and completely lacking in finesse, but impressive.

"My bad." The monster's laughter is gravelly and low. "Knight versus monster, fight to the death, all that. I won't forget."

"You better not." Bakugou lands a few quick and clever hits. When he backs out of range there are two or three more scores across the monster's arms.

"Your scars," he says. "Those from before the curse or after?"

The monster blinks, a thin flickering scrape of stone. "You can tell?"

It would be harder not to. So many days and so many hours in close quarters. There are striations in the obelisk of his body, and Bakugou can see now where the grooves are natural and where they are not. Mostly on his forearms. He forgot how intimate a battle could be.

He uses the monster's surprise to duck under his defense and jab at his undefended chest. In comes the other arm to slap the flat of the blade aside, glancing off his ribcage. Bakugou follows through, pivots, and brings the sword up to block a two-handed strike. He's nearly not strong enough—the monster bears down, and the sword nearly takes off Bakugou's nose. He goes down to one knee, and his whole body shakes under the strain. There's another shower of sparks, burning in his eyes. He loves it.

"Seriously, you might be the best sparring partner I've ever had," the monster says, like a damn mind-reader.

"I'm trying to *kill* you, dumbass," Bakugou reminds him, and then, "*Might* be?"

He drops the sword by a fraction, so the monster's arms skid down the blade and away. While he's trying to catch his own weight Bakugou flips the sword and butts the monster with the hilt, hard, across the temple. He rocks back a few steps, laughing.

"Didn't mean to offend you." He drops into a crouch and then lunges out of it, and Bakugou barely flips the sword around in time to block. It's not enough. The monster is a god damn battering ram; Bakugou feels the impact jar through the bone-frame of him, all his joints compressing, and then he goes flying, hitting the ground heavily and rolling back up onto his feet.

He works his jaw for a second. Spits out blood.

"As if a monster like you could offend me."

Something shifts in the monster's expression. It's too quick and alien to catch, but the sharp-toothed smile afterward is easier.

"A monster like me can do some damage, at least," he says, and, oh, the smile is a *grin*. "You're looking pretty ragged, man. We could call it for the day."

He's *teasing* him. He's teasing *Bakugou*. "Bastard. I'll kill you."

"Yeah, you said. Not very knightly."

They go again. When they burst apart ten minutes later, there is blood dripping down Bakugou's blade. It is not the monster's. Bakugou isn't sure the monster *can* bleed. Over the course of these many days his palms have worn thin and torn open and scabbed over and torn again. It's fine. They'll toughen up and grow callouses, like they always do. He flexes his fingers around the slick pommel, refines his grip.

"Your hands," the monster says, and there's something in his voice, something different that Bakugou can almost-not-quite place. It's not teasing anymore. "You should talk to Sero. He's good at mending things."

Bakugou glares at him.

"He's alright at mending things," the monster concedes. "Seriously. I'll still be here to spar tomorrow."

"We're not sparring." Bakugou drops into a defensive stance and starts circling. The monster matches him step for step, fancy footwork, and all. "Why don't you spar with the puppets if you want to spar? They could use a few dents. Good as new in the morning, anyway. Perfect punching bags."

"We used to. It was fun. But then I got more..." He gestures to his—everything. "Monstrous. It's not safe anymore."

He's got another look on his face. Bakugou is shit at reading regular people, much less stone monstrosities. But he feels like he should say something. He almost wants to. Before he can parse whatever the hell that means, the monster grins.

"That's why I'm having so much fun with you," he says.

Bakugou scowls. "I told you, I'm—"

"Right, right, you're 'trying to kill me.'"" He has the gall to put it in air quotes. He has the gall to *roll his eyes*.

"That's it. You're dead."

The monster just laughs again.

Later Bakugou hunts down the silver automaton and demands to be patched up. The stitchwork is shoddy—Bakugou has no problem telling him so—but he wraps Bakugou's raw and bloody hands with efficiency and professionalism. Bakugou scrutinizes his fingers and grumbles his approval. The fight ended in another draw,



but that's fine. He can always kill the monster tomorrow.



Bakugou starts taking his meals with the dolls. This is probably a dreadful fucking idea, but if he leaves them alone too long they start getting *ideas*, like following him and spying on him and dropping hints as subtle as a brick to the face that they should spend more time together, and just generally acting like a handful of stupid ducklings that imprinted on a predator instead of their mother. If Bakugou spends at least one meal a day with them, they're mostly satisfied to leave him alone otherwise. Mostly. It's not appeasement, he tells himself, it's strategy.

Sometimes they prod the subject of letting the monster sit to dinner with them, but he bares his teeth whenever they mention it. This is one thing he refuses to compromise on.

He's showing them how to poach pears properly when he realizes something. It's a whole god damn revelation, really, and a completely stupid one.

"You dumbasses were the ones putting out food for me. And clothes. And tea."

"Le doy," says the copper one.

"Yeah, le doy," echo the other two.

Bakugou considers cutting them to multicolored metallic ribbons for the sass, but instead he scoffs, and says, "No wonder everything tasted like shit."

Defiant cries all around, and Bakugou's smirk threatens to smooth into something altogether more disgusting. He gets it under control before that happens, thank god. Who knows what they'd get into their empty heads if he hadn't.



"You found me," says the monster. He's lounging on the roof.

"You couldn't hide from me forever," says Bakugou. A month or so into his internship and the monster seemed to vanish from the grounds. This was impossible, of course, so when he realized the only place left to hide was the roof, he immediately set to scaling the side of the manor.

The monster just chuckles beneath his breath. "I wasn't *hiding*, jeez. I just like coming up here. Knew you'd find me eventually. Honestly, I thought you'd get here faster."

*Faster?* He just climbed up a manor that *mostly doesn't exist*. After all the mind-bending consequences of directly interacting with illusion magic—gripping solid shadows and passing through illusory spires and steadfastly ignoring the impossible proportions of a facade that is twice the size of the actual structure beneath—he is dead certain he got up here as fast as anyone physically could. Hell, he probably climbed faster than the monster himself.



He tells the monster this, forgetting that he's not supposed to care what it thinks about him, and the monster just. Blinks at him, owlshly.

"Why didn't you take the stairs?"

"There are no stairs." But Bakugou's sinking gut already knows what happened.

"Dude, there really are. Either you're way more oblivious than I thought or the house was hiding them from you."

Bakugou takes this news with as much grace as possible. He only stabs the roof a couple times. "Stupid! Fucking! House!"

"Well, you're kind of an ass to it."

Bakugou can't directly refute that, so he just narrows his eyes. "Watch it."

The monster leans back and crosses his hands under his head. Bakugou kind of just stands there. The monster does not stop lounging. Bakugou raises his sword menacingly. The monster *continues* to not stop lounging, and Bakugou's sword wavers a little.

He says, "So you've finally accepted your death, huh? Smart. You never stood a chance."

"I haven't accepted my death. I'm just taking a little break, then we can get back to sparring. Come sit with me."

"We're not—"

"Right, I meant killing each other, my bad. Come on, come on, I want to show you something."

This must be a trap. Bakugou only follows along to show the monster that even when he thinks he's got him at his mercy, Bakugou will still beat him.

"What are we looking at," Bakugou growls.

"The sky!" And the monster spreads out his hands, tries to frame the boundless blue between them. "Doesn't it make you feel like you could do anything?"

"I *know* I can do anything," Bakugou says, and he makes the mistake of looking over. He knows it's a mistake because the look on the monster's face is something like admiration, and that can't possibly be right. Bakugou looks back at the sky, and after a moment he feels the monster's gaze leave him.

"I used to come up here to look out as far as I could, and just imagine what it would be like when I became a knight and roamed the kingdom, saving people. Like you." He's smiling. Bakugou can hear that he's smiling, and he doesn't, doesn't, doesn't look at him again. "Now I come up here when I need a morale boost. Always helps."

Bakugou frowns. "What do you need a morale boost for? You're a giant boulder that can fight. *I* have a tough time beating you most days. That means you can do

basically anything too.”

The monster is quiet, and Bakugou does look over, damn him. The monster’s edges have gentled, like a cliff worn smooth by the tide. “Do you think, if we’d met before all this, we would have been friends?”

“No,” Bakugou says, and hates that he sounds unsure. He doesn’t do friends. There are rivals, there are villains, there are squires. There are kings and knights. There are jobs and business transactions. There is glory. There is worthiness. There is shame. There is Deku.

None of those fit this—*thing* that he has with this monster, and that unnerves him. He expects the monster to look wounded, but he doesn’t. He’s smiling.

“I think we would have,” he says. “I don’t think I’d have given up until we were.”

Bakugou tries not to believe him. He does not succeed.

He huffs, and flops flat on the roof. “Fine, sure, I guess the sky *does* make me feel like I could do anything. Like kill you.” He tries to count the raindrops as they land on his face. “At least the rain is warm.”

“It was a summer storm, yeah.”

“What was?”

“When the witch cursed us. It was in the middle of the biggest storm I’ve ever seen.”

Figures. He waits, but the monster doesn’t elaborate. Instead he says, “What’s it feel like?”

Bakugou grunts. “Warm, I already said.”

A sigh, like wind through a canyon. “That sounds nice. I’d like to feel rain again.”

The monster’s eyes fall shut. They stay shut. After too long, Bakugou realizes that now is the perfect time to strike. The monster is unguarded and there is not a hint of artifice to it. Bakugou’s grip on the sword tightens until he hears the creak of leather. This is his chance. He’ll take it. He will.

The monster startles. “Shit, the rain, I forgot—you could get sick lying here, we should get you inside.”

Bakugou surprises into laughter. His hand relaxes around the hilt. “Of course, pneumonia. I knew you must be planning to kill me, I just I didn’t think it would be so stupid.”

The monster blinks at him. Then he attacks.

Bakugou swears and brings the sword to bear—too late. The monster settles over him, but he does not bare his fangs. Well, he does, kind of. He’s grinning.

"I don't want you to get pneumonia, Bakugou," he says. "There wouldn't be any honor in defeating a poor sickly knight during our next spar."



Today is the day. Bakugou can feel it. He navigates the manor with care, picks all the right doors. He keeps out of sight of the dolls. He creeps through the grounds, covers his tracks, locates the monster at the southernmost point of the barrier, completely unaware—

The monster turns and smiles at him.

"Hey, Bakugou! Could you tell me some stories?"

"What are you on about now," Bakugou says, holding the sword over his head like a dumbass. "Something I got to thinking about. You're a knight, you've got to have some stories. Y'know, defeating evil, protecting the weak. Adventure! Chivalry! Honor! You have any stories like that?"

He does, but storytelling soured for him ever since Deku's tall tale blew out of proportion. Still. He remembers a time when squires begged him to regale them with his adventures. He remembers when Deku was one of them. He preened under the attention, basked in the glory. It wasn't a bad feeling.

The monster continues, "Unless you don't think you can talk and fight at the same time, of course."

The thing is, Bakugou knows he's being baited. The other thing is, it works.

His intent is to tell one story and defeat the monster during the telling, but one story becomes two, becomes five. Unlike Deku, he has no need of excluding details or stretching truths. His stories are impressive enough in their own right. He doesn't know when impressing the monster became as important as killing him.

He drove out the wolves terrorizing a town. He defeated a troupe of bandits that attacked him on the road. He once hunted down a warlock infamous for blood magic, and that was before he found the sword.

Eventually they find themselves sitting in a tentative truce, sharpening their blade and arms respectively, though Bakugou isn't convinced either of them need it. There's a thrill when the monster's jewel eyes gleam a little brighter. It runs deep inside Bakugou like a vein of magma, heating his belly and his bones.

But it cools. The monster isn't shy about his disapproval.

"Why'd you do that?" he says, frowning, when Bakugou tells him about the dragon he chased into the mountains. "Dragons are only violent when their nest is threatened."

Bakugou frowns back. "Well, what the hell would you know about it? You're not a knight, you're a monster."



"Being a knight doesn't magically make you know right from wrong. Knowing right from wrong is what makes you a good knight."

"Spare me. How the hell do you know anything about dragons, anyway?"

Suddenly the monster's eyes get shifty. "I thought everyone knew that. What happened to the nest?"

Bakugou doesn't know what happened to the nest. He didn't ask.

He storms away with a promise to kill the monster tomorrow. The monster doesn't seem to know why Bakugou is angry, and that's fine, because Bakugou doesn't know either. The monster is right, is the thing—it was a bad job. The village knew the dragon's nest was to the east and still their greed drove them to expand, and expand. Bakugou had been sent by the king to rid the town of a dragon so that was what he did. It wasn't his business whose territory was stolen from whom.

He doesn't know where his feet are taking him. Maybe he doesn't want to. The clear stormy day is now clear stormy dusk, and the automatons are probably already in the kitchens, practicing the new recipes he taught them. He stalks past the door, rounds the corner and heads to the back. Without a battle to warm his blood the rain grips his body with chilled, clammy fingers. The boots aren't his—he hasn't been able to find his since the first day—and these ones have a hole worn at the left big toe. A slow flood starts up near the sole.

The dragon was not the monster, back then. So what does that make him?

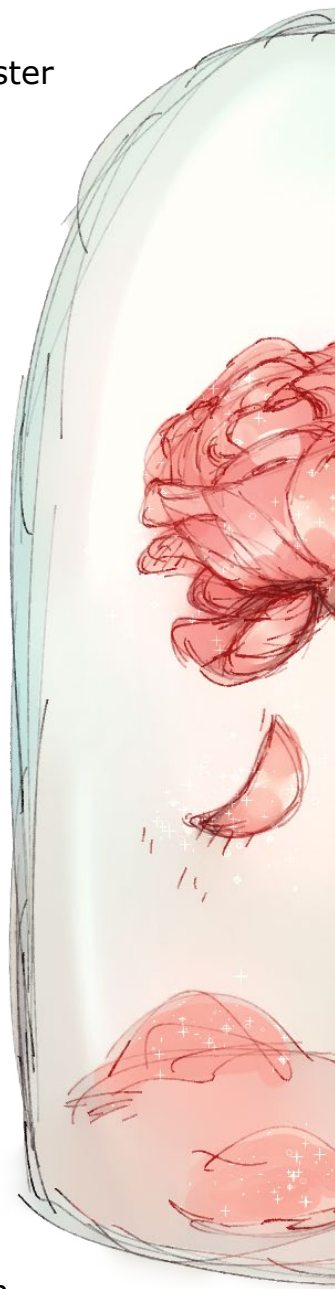
He stops outside the greenhouse.

He hates this place. Hates the way it stands against the sky, hates the shadows crawling inside, hates how it feels like it's cored him out and stuffed another person's feelings inside. Sadness and fear and loathing and discomfort.

But maybe that's what he needs. Maybe he's gotten too comfortable.

He steps inside, and the smell of nothingness is overpowering. The shadowy flora, he can see now, are roses—dozens and dozens of roses, richly, darkly red, with thorns like those on the gate, as long as his fingers. He pushes through, and breaks into a small concrete clearing. Sitting beneath the domed peak of the greenhouse, in view the stars and the rain, is a small stone fountain. It's cracked and forlorn, and just to the side, quiet, modest, and nearly hidden, is a single red rose, suspended in glass.

He knows at once that this is the heart of the curse. Each petal is cut from crystal. They seem to softly glow. At the bottom of the glass, instead of fallen petals, there is only a fine, glittering red dust.



He draws his sword. Maybe this is it. Maybe this is all he needs to do. Maybe shattering this fragile crystalline flower will break the spell, and Bakugou will be free, and he will be worthy, and the sword will wake for him—

Maybe the monster will die.

Bakugou hesitates.

"What are you doing?"

The monster is standing behind him, a hulking figure in the doorway. His eyes dart from the flower to the sword to Bakugou. His shoulders drop.

"I asked you not to come in here." He's frowning. He's—disappointed. Bakugou cannot remember when the subtleties of the monster's expression became clear to him. He cannot remember the last time someone's disappointment mattered this much.

He panics.

"And why the fuck did you expect me to listen to you?" Something awful surges up into his gullet and he reaches past it for the deep well of anger. "I'm a knight. You're nothing but a filthy monster."

The blade flashes in the moonlight and slots neatly beneath the monster's chin. The monster doesn't so much as twitch. The sword tips up—the monster's head tips with it.

"I asked you not to, Bakugou," he says.

Shame. That is the awful something crowding Bakugou's insides, and he *cannot* abide it.

"Why'd you ask me that, huh?" He snarls it, as mean as he can.

"Because of that flower. Because it's the heart of the curse. Because destroying it would break the spell, wouldn't it, and you fucking *knew* that, and you didn't tell me. Because you're a *coward*."

The monster flinches back a step. Bakugou presses the advantage, forces him out into the storm. It's something else to see him stumble back when hours and hours of fighting had only ever made him smile. At that moment, the silver automaton cuts a sharp outline into the light of the manor's open door.

"Soup's on, Bakugou!" he calls into the dark. "Oh hey, they're going at it again. Kami, Mina, you're missing the show!"

But he sees soon that he's wrong. Bakugou is vicious, and the monster is on the defensive.

"We don't know what destroying the rose would do," the monster says, and quick-steps away from another brutal blow. "It could trap us here forever, for all we know!"

He sounds desperate. He's refusing to attack. Bakugou wishes he would.

"Bullshit. You were too afraid to use the best and fastest chance to escape. And we need fast, don't we? Those shattered petals, they're a time limit, aren't they?" The silence is answer enough. "It's your curse that trapped me here. *Your* responsibility. Chivalry? Duty? Don't make me laugh. If you had an ounce of honor you would have told me."

All the automatons are watching now. The gold one approaches, rain pinging off his gleaming carapace. "Guys, your blood is up, maybe now isn't the best time to—" He yelps when Bakugou takes a swing at him.

"Would you just *shut up*?" He barely has time to register the automaton's wounded look before the monster is in his face, arms and sword clashing.

"*Don't* tell him to shut up," he growls. Finally. "It was bluster before, but now you're just being mean."

"How is that news to you? I'm *mean*, I'm fucking *malicious*, and I'm trying to kill you."

He sidesteps, and the monster's weight glances off the sword. He tumbles to the ground and barely gets his guard up in time to block Bakugou's next strike.

"Why, *why* are you like this? We've been nothing but kind to you!"

"I didn't ask for your kindness," Bakugou hisses. "I don't want your paltry fucking *kindness*. All I want is you dead!"

"Damn it, Bakugou, every time I think you might have some human decency you turn around and act like a—" He stops, looks sharply away, and Bakugou burns and burns.

"Like a what?" He spits. "Go on, say it. What do I act like? A monster? A villain?"

"Bakugou, shut up."

And Bakugou—he does, his teeth snap shut audibly, because he's just realized that the monster is not avoiding his gaze. He's staring out at the forest.

"Something's coming."

It's instinct: offensive shifts to defensive, and Bakugou comes side to side with the monster, sword raised. The automatons bunch up behind them. The forest is still and silent.

Behind him, one of the automatons gasps, and Bakugou spins to see a man and a woman standing in the no man's land between himself and the manor. The man's expression is hidden beneath an executioner's cowl. His posture is at odds with itself, both guarded and open. The woman is small and slight. Her hair is pulled up into knots and her clothes are nondescript. Bakugou doesn't see any of that. He sees her eyes, which are empty, and he sees that he can't see her hands, both hidden by long sleeves. Bakugou opens his mouth but the words jam up behind his

heart, hammering in his throat.

The monster edges in front of him. "Who are you? How did you get here?"

"We don't have to tell you anything," says the cowl. "We got here by magic, and that's how we'll leave!"

Bakugou knows it's the truth. The stench of nothingness radiates off them.

"This land is cursed," says the monster, "You shouldn't have come. What do you want?"

The woman with the dead eyes tilts her head. "Wow, a real-life monster," she says. "Do you bleed, Mr. Monster?"

"Wow, I'd like to see that!" says the cowl, and then he says, "We should probably stick to the mission, Toga!"

The woman—Toga—pouts, and draws two long knives from her sleeves, wicked and sharp.

"We've been looking for you for a while," she says. "So be a good little boy and come quietly. We'll all be friends, and no one will get hurt."

"We're not going anywhere with you," growls the monster, and something dark claws up behind Bakugou's eyes, because the woman smiles.

"I'm so happy you said that."

The monster shoves Bakugou behind him. Bakugou is so appalled by this stunt that he just *lets* it happen, falling back several paces as the woman rushes the monster. She's fast. The monster can't counter every attack, but her knives are just knives, however sharp. He can hold his own against her. Bakugou looks past them, to where the automatons are trying to close the distance. The cowl plants himself between them. He slams his hands together, and begins weaving complicated patterns with his fingers. Bakugou's breath catches.

"Stay back!" he shouts at them, knowing even as he runs that he won't make it in time. "He's a magician!"

"Good guess," the cowl calls over his shoulder. "You couldn't *be* more off! I only ever learned one spell, but it's a big one. It's served me well." He twitches. "It ruined my life! And now it'll ruin yours."

He pulls his hands violently apart, and before Bakugou can cut him in two his sword is parried by two sharp knives—the woman's knives. Impossible. She's still fighting the monster behind him, he can hear them, yet here she stands, with her smile and her dead eyes. And there she is a stone's throw away, charging at the automatons. The yellow one reaches out to shock her and she spins out of the way, her knife trailing behind her, light dancing off the blade like a ribbon. A flick of the wrist, and the yellow automaton stumbles back, missing a hand.



Bakugou's first, absurd thought is: *only I can do that*. He slashes at the woman in front of him and doesn't bother watching her melt into the mud.

"Get away from them!"

Arms catch him around the waist and throw him back. The woman straddles him, laughing, and he bucks her off; another copy takes her place. And another. And another. Hands rake at him—hands and hands—they pin him down. His nightmares are bleeding into the waking world and a primal cry tries to rip through his belly, through his ribcage, through his throat. The scent of nothingness swells and threatens to drown him.

A new hand—different, larger, known—reaches out from the darkness, and Bakugou takes it. With one heave he's pulled free. For just an instant his eyes meet the monster's, and then he's tossed across the grounds a *second time, what the hell*. Bakugou spits out mud and clutches at his hand, tattered where the monster's razor claws clutched too tight. He lifts his head to shout.

The words leave him. The pain leaves him. All of it washes away in a rush of rain and panic: the monster has taken his place, slowly disappearing beneath copy after copy of the woman and her knives. They flash like wolves' teeth and they slice and they tear, chipping and chiseling and reducing him in a thousand horrendous little cuts. The automatons cry out. The monster falls to one knee.

Bakugou's vision washes red.

One swing of the sword dissolves three copies into muck. He pivots and spears two more, and peels a third from the monster's back. The sword does not wake for him but it *sings*. Flesh is cleaved from mud is cleaved from rock, and the monster stares up at him, his eyes full of wonder. His cliffside face is cracked. Deeply, at the temple, like the epicenter of an earthquake. Bakugou feels that wound more deeply than he feels the woman's knife biting into his shoulder.

He seizes the wrist attached to it and hauls her up and over. She lands on her back, winded, and Bakugou waits for her to dissolve like all the others. When she doesn't, he and the monster each rear back to finish it, and the cowl bellows, "*Kurogiri!*"

The nothingness returns in full force. Bakugou doesn't think. He dives over the woman and tackles the monster back, and a second later a swirling black mist opens in the ground and swallows the woman whole. A short distance away the world tears open a second time, and a hand emerges from the depths to land on the cowl's shoulder.

"A tactical retreat would be wise." The voice resonates in Bakugou's bones. "He can only resist what he is for so long."

With one last glare, the cowl backs into the darkness. The mist dissipates, and Bakugou can smell the rain again.

Across the field the automatons come back into view. They huddle together, and

they breathe hard, and they shiver in unison—human responses they don't need to affect. In the back of his mind, Bakugou thinks it might be a fear response.

"I hurt you."

The monster touches his wrist, and suddenly Bakugou is anchored to the world once more. He is aware of the cold and the wet and the heavy way his borrowed clothes cling; he is aware of the pain where he's been struck and stabbed. He is aware of the monster, of the rupture at his temple, of the dazed and devastated look in his eyes. He is aware of the monster's claws, hovering helplessly around the shredded skin of Bakugou's hand.

"You didn't," Bakugou grunts, but the monster shakes his head.

"I hurt you."

Bakugou withdraws his hand. He doesn't know what to say.

The automatons reach them. The copper one ducks beneath the monster's right arm and hauls him to his feet, and when they start to sway, Bakugou supports them on the left. The manor opens its doors to them, and they stagger into sanctuary.

The other two scurry ahead. They find the door to the parlor and then they split, the gold one to light the hearth and the silver one to drag a silky settee in front of it. Bakugou does his part in depositing the monster onto the sofa and then he stands there, with nothing else to do, nothing to occupy his hands, or his thoughts, or his sword. The automatons fuss and the monster's head lolls, blearily. He smiles for them, tells them he's fine, tells them he's comfortable. Bakugou feels helpless. It is a horrible, hateful feeling.

He says, "What can we do?"

The copper one, relieved of her burden on the monster's other side, sighs. "Nothing. His thick head will right itself." She raps her knuckles against the monster's head, gentle and fond. "All we can do is keep him awake until it does."

Keep him awake. Easy enough. If he starts to drift Bakugou can just give him a smack upside the head. Except for how his head looks like a cracked eggshell, and who knows what a wrong touch would do. So keep him awake some other way. Talking. But that's no good either, because Bakugou's chest is filled with heat and the heat is rising into words and the words are about the assholes who did this to them, why they did this to them, whose fault it really was that the monster was nearly taken apart. The words batter at his teeth, and he stalks the room like a caged animal, back and forth, back and forth. The monster watches him with lazy, clouded eyes.

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you about the rose," he murmurs. "I should have. You're right. It wasn't fair of me."

"Don't be stupid," Bakugou bites out. "Why would you give someone trying to kill you *another* reason to kill you? Of course you didn't tell me."

The monster looks surprised by this admission, and then the look melts into something unaccountably warm. In Bakugou's throat the words bubble up again, stronger than before, and he averts his gaze to somewhere around the monster's torso. The monster misunderstands. "Most of them are old," he says.

"What are you babbling about now?"

"The scars. You asked about them a few days ago." The monster blinks a few times, slow. "Few weeks ago? Don't remember. The ones on my back and chest, those are old. And this one here, over my eye. But my arms—all those are new. Trying to bust through the barrier. That's how we know this—" he gestures vaguely to his cracked head, "—will close up on its own. I'll be fine. You don't have to worry."

"I'm not worried," Bakugou scoffs, and the monster, for some reason Bakugou cannot fathom, smiles.

"I know."

The copper one touches Bakugou's shoulder. "I'll get you both some tea and dry clothes," she says. "Keep him awake."

Bakugou tries to say don't tell me what to do, but he can't manage it. When the silver one approaches with a soft roll of bandages, he can't quite manage to tell him to back off, either.

The monster watches Bakugou's torn flesh disappear beneath the fabric, and then he watches the blood seep through. He isn't smiling anymore.

Bakugou says, "She touched you."

The monster starts like he's waking from a trance. "Huh?"

"Steamhead. She touched you." Then, clearing his throat, "It didn't hurt?"

"Nah. I mean, yes, it hurts, I'm kind of broken—" A touch of bitterness— "but *she* didn't hurt me. It would only hurt if she pressed hard. Otherwise I barely feel it." He blinks once. "Do you want to touch?"

Bakugou doesn't know how to answer that. His bandaged fingers twitch, so he curls them into fists.

"You're not broken," he grumbles, and before the monster can scoff—he's going to, his face is twisting up already—Bakugou steps in close, inspects the fissure with his eyes. Whatever the monster was going to say cuts off abruptly. He holds very still.

It's not easy to see, but between the topography of his skin there is a shimmering. Deep red and mineral, like a vein of mercury. It catches the light.

Bakugou's fingers uncurl, slowly. He lifts a hand. "Did you win?"

"I guess."

"Yes or no, rocks for brains."

He traces the ridge without touching. His fingers hover just above. The way it branches, the way it almost seems to glow. The fact that the monster is alive beneath it. It's—beautiful.

"I—yeah. Yes, I won."

"Then you're not broken. These are battle scars. They prove how hard you fought, and that you're alive. They prove you're strong."

He touches the break: first his fingertips, then his palm. It's rough and cool, and if he were to press with his thumb a little harder he's sure the edge would cut him. Kirishima's breath stutters, and Bakugou jerks his hand back.

"You didn't hurt me," the monster says quickly. "I just—your hands are warm."

His big eyes seem somehow bigger. Bakugou cannot speak, and he cannot look away.

The moment unfurls, and then—

And then smoke starts billowing from the fireplace, because Sparky is a fuckup who just shoved his entire sparking wrist in without even opening the flue. Bakugou gets up.

"You're doing it wrong." He elbows Kaminari out of the way, and in moments the flue is open and the fire is breathing, orange and clean.

"You're good at this, Bakugou!" enthuses Kaminari.

"No shit, I'm good at everything." He prods the fire and feeds it, grumbling to himself. "Dust all over the damn place, can't even start a fire. Shitty servants, you ask me."

"Oh," says the monster. "Well, yeah, that's because they're not really servants."

"What?" says Bakugou.

"Y'know, like how I'm not really a lord."

"*What,*" says Bakugou, more vehemently.

"This place never had servants, and I'm not a lord. Wasn't born one, anyway. The last lord took me in and raised me like I was his own." The monster says this very matter of factly, as though it is not a wholeass revelation. "Toyomitsu and Tamaki weren't born lords either, so they didn't like having people wait on them. But they took on Kaminari and Mina and Sero when I asked, hired them to take care of the place—"

"Hold on, hold on, you're not making any god damn sense. Who the hell is Tamaki? Did you say *Toyomitsu*? Like the knight?"



Kirishima grins, sloppily. "Sir Toyomitsu "Fatgum" Taishiro. Yeah. One of the greatest knights there's ever been."

"Hell. And the other guy?"

"Amajiki Tamaki. Brave, serious, kind of quiet. He gets a little anxious, but he's more hardworking and determined than anyone I've ever met. Toyomitsu saw all that in him, and raised him to be a knight. The garden is theirs. Tamaki is Toyomitsu's first son, Tetsutetsu was third. I'm the second. Don't know what he saw in me."

For a second Kirishima's eyes spin into focus, and he must see the questions unfolding in Bakugou's eyes. He shrugs, and winces a little.

"I don't remember my first parents. I think...I think maybe I lived with dragons. Don't really remember that either, but that's where most of the early scars come from, I'd guess."

Dragons. Hell. It makes a kind of sense, when Bakugou thinks about it.

"For a while I just...wandered from town to town. Then I found Mina, and then we found Kaminari and Sero. We helped each other survive. And then one day Toyomitsu found me, and he took me in. He gave my friends jobs. I was learning to be a knight. We'd throw these big parties for the townsfolk every few months, invite them in and feed them. We were happy. And then." He stops.

"What?" says Bakugou, after a long moment. Kirishima shakes his head.

"Nothing. You don't want to hear about all this. It's not a good story."

The fire spits and hisses, and Kirishima's eyes scrape closed. Bakugou thinks to leave it at that. But the copper automaton said to keep him awake, didn't she, and something about the unhappy stillness in him is unacceptable. Despite himself, Bakugou wants to hear it.

"Hey," he says. He aims for forceful and doesn't quite manage it. "Tell me."

Kirishima opens his eyes.

He tells a story.



Once there was a knight, and his three noble sons. For his valor in protecting the realm, the knight was named lord of a small town, and was charged with defending its people. As lord, the knight was just and good, the people loved him.

All were happy.

On the first cool day that the leaves began to change, there came a summons. A darkness was rising in the west, and the knight was called upon to protect the realm once more. So the knight gathered his sons and charged them with defending the town in his stead. He swore he would return before the seasons changed.

The second son wished to join him, but when he opened his mouth to speak, he thought of his duty to the townsfolk, and he said nothing. And so the knight left.

Time passed. As lords, the sons were just and good, and the people loved them. They worried for their father, but they were brave, and they were happy. The seasons changed, the first snow fell, and the knight did not return.

The sons gathered together. I will go after our father, said the first son, and I will return before the seasons change. The second son wished to join him, but when he opened his mouth to speak, he thought of his duty to his friends, who were loyal and would follow him into danger, and he said nothing. And so the first son left.

Time passed. As lords, the younger sons were just and good, and the people loved them. They worried for their father and their brother, but they were brave, and they did their best to be happy. The seasons changed, the snow melted, and the first son did not return.

The two remaining sons gathered together. I will go after our father and brother, said the third son, and I will return before the seasons change. The second son wished to join him, but when he opened his mouth to speak, he thought of his fear. He said nothing.

And so the third son left.

Time passed. The second son worried for his father. He worried for his brothers. He tried to be just and good, and maybe the people loved him, but he was not brave and he was not happy, because in his heart he knew the truth.

The seasons changed. On the night of the first summer storm, there came a knocking at the door.

It was not the knight. Neither was it the first or third sons. It was a witch, and she came requesting shelter from the heat and the rain, in exchange for a single rose.

The second son welcomed her into his home. He was a gracious host, and he and his friends cared for her as best they could. They ate in the kitchens, and then he showed her the library, and then the parlor, and then the greenhouse, where they waited out the rest of the storm. The witch seemed kind, and they spoke long into the night. The second son told her things he hadn't told anyone, not his brothers, not his friends, hardly even himself. He told her the truth locked away in his heart: that he was nothing more than a monstrous coward.

And when he was done, the witch wove her curse.

To teach him the error of his ways, the second son was transformed into a hideous beast, that all the world might see him for what he truly was. Only true love would break the curse, and if the second son did not find it before the rose's last petal fell, then he, his friends, and his home would remain monstrous for the rest of their days.

But the young witch took pity. She raised an enchanted forest to protect the villagers and then she left, in the hopes of finding another way to break the spell. She

had realized the futility of her terms, for surely there was no one who could learn to love such a selfish, cowardly beast.



There is quiet for a while.

"...or something like that," Kirishima says, at last. "I can't remember all the words. She tried to explain, but I was kind of...out of it, at the time. But, y'know. Curse. Monster. True love. All the classic stuff. I still think she was trying to help. Don't think she meant for it to get so out of hand, but like I said. She didn't have control of her magic. Had a sweet pink hat, though."

Bakugou stares at him. How the light shatters off the facets of his skin and hair and teeth, and in his eyes, and in his scars.

He opens his mouth. He does not know what he is going to say. "They're after me."

Kirishima blinks. "What? Who?"

"The assholes who did that to you. They're—" He clears his throat roughly. Too late to take it back. "They're after me."

"Why?"

"They want me to join them or some shit. There's this sword—All Might's sword."

"All Might. Like—the knight. Like *The Knight*?" Kirishima's eyes are buffed by awe. "I know that story. He knew he'd be needed again someday so he left his sword behind, the one that would only wake for the worthy. And then a stable boy found it, and he broke the prince's curse—"

"And the stable boy was knighted, and he and the prince lived happily ever after, yeah yeah, gag me. Well, that's not the whole story, all right? When stupid Deku found the sword—"

"You *know* the kid who found the sword? *Dude*."

Bakugou frowns. He doesn't want the monster to be awed by Deku. He doesn't want the monster to be awed by anyone but him. That's a startling realization, and he pushes it away, away, away. "Look, are you going to let me tell the story or not?"

The monster mimes a lock and key, fastening shut his teeth. Bakugou rolls his eyes. He glares hard into the fire, and then back at Kirishima. He started this. He will goddamn finish it.

"I've known the whelp since we were kids," he says. "I became a knight because I'm the best, and he didn't because he's a worthless little snot. But he always wanted to. Was always practicing with sticks and junk, always yammering on about—duty, and chivalry. Like this one dumb pile of rocks I know." Kirishima smiles like it wasn't an insult. Hell, maybe it wasn't. "There were reports of this—"

power. Out near my hometown. A light. Some said it was a fallen star. People were afraid, so I was sent to check it out. Deku was around there, so the idiot went to check it out too. We ran into each other searching for it, and before I could kick his ass, we found the sword."

He can still see it. The derelict sword and the unmarked grave, overgrown by moss and lichen and flowers. Like a fairy story, made real by wishing.

"It wasn't glowing or anything, and it wasn't a star, that was all bullshit. But yeah, it was magical. And powerful. Anyone could tell."

And he was so mystified by it that he approached without a second thought, and didn't even snap at Deku when he did the same.

"We both went for it. We touched it at the same time, and it just—broke. Clean in two, down the length of the blade. I was left with a dead lump of metal, no magic, no nothing. And Deku—Deku was deemed *worthy*."

*Then* there was the light. He can still see it. The sword waking in Deku's hand, not his own. It burned behind his eyelids. He can still see it.

Bakugou snubs his nose. His voice is gruffer than it was. "You know the rest. Deku goes on his stupid quest, breaks the prince's curse, overthrows the evil king, whatever. Everyone's heard that, but no one's heard about me, or my half of the legendary sword." Almost no one. "That's what I thought, anyway. I didn't understand—still don't—why I wasn't good enough. I'm *better* than Deku, at everything. Why wasn't I enough? Why aren't I—"

He realizes that his gaze has dropped. Kirishima is very quiet and very still; Bakugou knows he has not fallen asleep. He swallows hard, and does not lift his gaze.

"A man called Shigaraki found me. I don't know how he heard about my half of the sword, but he was more than happy to explain to me why I wasn't worthy." He can feel himself smiling, and it feels vicious, and wretched. "He said it was my heart—that in my heart I was like him. Not a hero, or a knight. A villain. That was why All Might's sword wouldn't wake for me. And that was what made me a perfect recruit on his quest to bring back All for One."

The monster takes a sharp breath. Bakugou laughs unhappily.

"Yeah. Everyone knows that story too. I told him to go fuck himself, and he's been after me ever since. I thought if I could slay a few monsters before he caught up, All Might's sword would acknowledge me. I'd prove that I'm better than Deku, that I'm worthy, that I'm not just a—that I'm not like Shigaraki. I thought I shook him and his lackeys off by the time I came here, but I guess they found me anyway. Shit. Listen, I'm—" The words stick against the roof of his mouth. He scrapes them out anyway. "I'm sorry you got mixed up in my bullshit."

There. It's all out. He knows now. Bakugou can't imagine his expression, or maybe he's afraid to. He takes a breath, and meets Kirishima's gaze.



There is no judgment there, and no pity. His eyes are like the fire: embers, glowing.

Kirishima says, "You're not a villain, Bakugou."

Come morning the automatons are restored, and Kirishima's wounds have closed into scars. He passed out as soon as he was allowed, and he continued to rest well into the morning, sprawled out right there in front of the cooling coals. But by evening he's pruning or plucking or whatever he does in the garden just like any other day. Bakugou watches him while he gathers courage of a different sort than he's used to. He approaches.

"Hey."

The new scars map like a spider's web across Kirishima's face, tilted up through the rain. His eyes are clear and well. Some unnamed tension in Bakugou's chest loosens and falls away.

"Hey, Bakugou. I'm just getting dinner together, then I'm gonna go on patrol early—"

Bakugou crouches and starts splitting the load of peppers between Kirishima's arms and his own. "Come inside first. We need to come up with a new plan of attack with these asshats lurking around. We'll talk about it while I eat."

Kirishima's smile drops, and then returns with twice the force. "Yeah! Yeah, that sounds—yes, definitely. Good idea."

Bakugou snorts a little. He turns back to the house, stops, and turns back around.

"Kirishima," he growls, crowding in close like a challenge, "you're no coward."

Kirishima fish-mouths at him, and that's fine, Bakugou doesn't want an answer. He stomps back to the house, only to see flashes of silver, gold, and pink vanish from the doorway. Great. There'll be no living with them after this.



Their options:

They could wait for the witch. She promised she'd be back to free them once she learned to control her magic, and surely she knows the time constraints better than anyone. Bakugou spits at the mention of her.

"Like hell are we waiting around to be rescued by the asshole who did this to you. She'll come back or she won't, I mean for us to be long gone by then."

They could abide by the terms of the curse: true love's kiss and all. That one's least likely to work, given the company. The automatons get shifty.

"What?" he demands.

"Nothing," they say together, which is definitely something. "You're probably right."

Probably least likely.”

They titter and wink at each other. Bakugou spits again.

Next there's the glass with the crystal rose. No one is comfortable with the idea of destroying it, so they log that idea as a last resort and don't mention it again.

Their best chance, most frustrating of all, has always been there on Bakugou's back, and they can't use it. The sword is a cursebreaker by nature; if Bakugou could wake it, he knows he could get them out of here. But there are no monsters here that he's willing to slay, and therefore no way to prove his worth. He feels like he will burn to ashes with useless, fruitless bitterness.

Lastly, there are the lurkers still out in the forest. It's been quiet since the attack, and Bakugou wants very badly to say they've quit, but he knows better. There's a distant blue flame flickering in the forest. The glow is cold and patient. They're there. They're waiting.

"I still don't get how they escaped the first time," says Kaminari. "Shouldn't the curse have trapped them here?"

"Magic is weak to magic," Bakugou says. "They have a gate wizard. Magic like that cuts loopholes in the fabric of reality. If I agree to join them, they'll have to teleport me out, and then I can free you from the outside."

“No.” Kirishima’s voice is unyielding. “We’re not trading you to save ourselves. We’ll find another way.”

Bakugou isn't sure there is another way, at least not a viable one, but he meets Kirishima's eyes, and it's like laying on the roof, staring up at that vast and open sky: he knows they can do anything. They'll find another way.



In the weeks following the attack, Bakugou is forced to reevaluate some things. A lot of things.

First thing's first: he's stuck here for the long haul. Even if he still wanted to kill Kirishima, his stab-the-monster-until-it-dies strategy has clearly proven ineffective. Bakugou is not the type to bash his head against a wall pursuing a useless course of action. He needs a new plan if he wants to get out of here—one that will involve working with Kirishima instead of against him.

(And. Yeah. He *doesn't* want to kill Kirishima. That's another thing to reevaluate. He turns it in his mind at night, over and over.)

Second: as long as he's rethinking his escape plan he might as well rethink his approach to his not-so-temporary accommodations. If he's going to be here a while, that means there are going to be some changes around here.

"Alright, which one of you assholes do the cleaning?"

None of the assholes do the cleaning. This becomes apparent when all three automatons start pretending to whistle.

"You're a disgrace. You were hired to take care of the house, so what the hell *can* you do?"

"I did the cooking," Ashido says.

"You did not do the cooking," Bakugou corrects. "Even if you sometimes put food in front of faces and those faces ate it, you were not cooking. Cooking is the process of putting ingredients together until you have something edible. You deconstructed food into over-steamed, tasteless, inedible dogshit. Try again."

"I made a mean cup of tea," Ashido says, and shoots him a thumbs up. "Also you're a dick!"

"More honest, but effectively useless, and I hate you. Bolts for brains: go."

"I kept everything warm and well-lit. Fireplaces, hearths, braziers, candles, you name it," Kaminari offers. That is all he offers.

"That is not a job. That's barely a god damn chore." Bakugou endeavors to keep from grinding his teeth because he doesn't love the idea of a life consigned to soup. "Sero, you're my last hope. Did you hear me use your name, Sero. That's me betting my last ounce of faith in humanity on the threadbare hope that you are slightly more competent than I usually give you credit for. Tell me what your job was."

"I mended things," says Sero. "Mr. Jack of All Trades. You need something fixed, I'm your guy."

Bakugou considers this.

"You're on thin ice," he says, grudgingly, "but it's a start. Alright losers, listen up. We're going to straighten up this rathole and then you three are going to learn how to be slightly less useless piles of junk."

Collective groans. "But why? It'll just get gross again tomorrow."

"Because I refuse to live in a sty another goddamn day, you hear me? Quit whining."

They do not quit whining. Ashido pretends to rust over and break down. "Mercy!" cries Kaminari. But Bakugou is merciless.

They start with the moth-bitten curtains.

"How are you so bad at this?"

They've taken the curtains outside and shaken them out—all of them. Now they're sat in the long hall, sewing shut the most egregious tears.

Bakugou snatches the sheer fabric from Sero's hands. The other two are laughably terrible, relegated mostly to hanging the curtains back up once Bakugou and Sero

are done, but that's what makes Sero's shoddy work so infuriating: Bakugou is expecting more. He makes quick work of the stitch, grumbling all the while, and then hands it back. "Like that, see?"

Sero whistles through his teeth. Bakugou is unabashedly disturbed. How the hell does he do that? His smile isn't even *real*.

"Whoa, you're pretty good at this. Color me surprised."

Now Bakugou is unabashedly offended. "What's there to be surprised about, gears for brains?"

"You can't keep calling all of us fill-in-the-blank for brains, it's unoriginal. And I don't mean anything by it! Only that you don't give off the vibe of someone who would be so handy."

Bakugou jabs a finger into Sero's silver chassis. "I'm good at *everything*, don't forget it."

"Okay, let's not get ahead of ourselves. I said you're *pretty* good."

His eyes narrow. "Watch yourself."

"I'm just saying. Your stitch here was alright, sure, but it was one stitch. This is my whole job. When it comes down to it, I'm sure I'm better."

Thus Bakugou sets about breaking Sero's spirit by proving that he is better at absolutely everything. He mends drapes, tablecloths, and quilts. He binds broken furniture and seals cracks in walls and windows. He repairs clothes that Kirishima has torn, and Kirishima hugs him for it, which—what the fuck ever, it's not important. He works well into the evening to show Sero up and it is a raging success. It continues to be a raging success until he realizes that he played right into Sero's hands and did all his work for him.

Sero gets a few dents for that. He claims they're worth it. He's less smug the next day, when all the house is restored to its previous shambly state and Bakugou stalks behind him, undoing his work and making him do it again.

Every day for several timeless days, they clean. The bedrooms get a brutal dusting. The floors are viciously mopped. Layers upon layers of grime are scoured from the windows. Most violently they tackle the kitchen, scrubbing and scraping and drowning as many things in soap and water as they can. Mold, grease, soot, and gristle are eradicated. Rotting food is located and disposed of without mercy. Ashido's steam is vital here, and Bakugou does not let this weapon go to waste.

Some days they attack on all fronts, improving the state of the whole house by a margin. Other days they focus on one room, unleashing a concentrated cleaning barrage until the place is immaculate. Kirishima helps when he isn't patrolling the perimeter. The house grumbles suspiciously, but with time, in the face of Bakugou's aggressive and unrelenting campaign, the changes begin to take. The dust isn't so thick. The air isn't as rank and musty. The morning light is cleaner.



"I can't believe it," Kaminari says, for the third time, running a finger along a kitchen counter and failing to pick up oily residue. "I seriously can't believe it. How'd you know it would work?"

Bakugou rolls his eyes. "You're a talking tin can, this is where you draw the line?"

He, Kaminari, and Kirishima are waiting on the carrots and tomatoes to finish roasting; a few minutes more and they'll burn, but Kaminari's being vigilant. In the cooking and fighting lessons Bakugou has been giving them, he's the weak link in the three person chain. Ashido has improved the most by far, and Sero is as steady and reliable as ever. At the moment they're out on patrol, keeping eyes on the treeline.

Still—and Kaminari checks on the food again—he refuses to give in without a fight. Bakugou can respect that.

Bakugou says, "I didn't know it'd work. Sometimes magic is rigid and sometimes it's flexible. It learns, it adapts. You said the witch didn't know what she was doing, and anyone with eyes can see the curse is inconsistent. I took a gamble." He shrugs. "I would have kept it up even if it didn't work. Just because you fools don't have enough self respect to manage some upkeep doesn't mean you get to subject me to your filth."

Kaminari makes to answer, but lunch is done, so he turns up his nose and tends to the oven instead. Hunched as carefully on a stool as a giant rock monster can be, Kirishima laughs. He's smiling at Bakugou—that seems to be all he does anymore. It's stupid and Bakugou is done trying to get him to stop. As far as fighting goes, Kirishima still has the automaton's beat. He pushes himself harder, gives more of himself. All of himself. Never once has Bakugou seen him put forth anything less than his best, and that fills him with inexplicable pride.

"So it's like a hair part," Kaminari says, apparently still hung up on the magic thing. "Flip it the other way long enough, that's the way it'll start to grow."

"I guess, if you want to make it sound stupid." He spears a tomato slice. "That's fine. You could do better." Then the carrot. "That's still dogshit, but less heinous dogshit."

While Kaminari struggles with whether or not to take this as a compliment, Kirishima stuffs his face thoughtfully. They've been taking their meals together since the attack; turns out he *can* eat, he just doesn't need to, like how Bakugou has caught him breathing out of habit.

"If we hit the border hard enough and long enough, could the magic learn—or adapt—to let us out?" It's not a bad question, except for how he's dripping bits of carrot and tomato juice all over Bakugou's clean kitchen.

"Don't talk with your mouth full, you fucking heathen." He grabs a recently de-moldified dish towel and scrubs at Kirishima's face with prejudice. "And no, I don't think so. With how long you've been chucking yourself at the border I'd bet the witch got that part of the curse right." Kirishima's face threatens to fall, and

Bakugou finds himself adding, "But, hell. You've got me now, which makes a difference. And if the rust buckets keep up their training, it might be worth a shot."

Kirishima brightens so fast that Bakugou knows it was the right thing to say. He doesn't question why. Kaminari is giving him a strange look, but he turns away when Kirishima comes in for a high five. Bakugou finishes his lunch, washes his plate, and decides to try and rest his eyes before it's his turn on patrol.

He opens the door.

He closes the door.

Kirishima and Kaminari are still high-fiving like idiots. Bakugou returns to them, and says, very calmly, "Where the fuck is that?"

They look at him, and then at each other, and then at the door. They don't seem nearly as surprised when they open it.

"You've never seen the library?" Kirishima asks.

"There is no library." Except how there very evidently is.

"Oh, dude." Kaminari is delighted. "Dude. Didn't the house hide the stairs from you too? That's House: two, Bakugou: zero."

"It's probably showing you now as a thank you for cleaning it," Kirishima offers.

"Ha! The house pranked you, and then you *cleaned* it. House: three, Bakugou: zero."

Bakugou knocks Kaminari about the head to shut him up, and his indignant fury is marginally soothed by the satisfying echo. "Figures you're hollow up there. A library is wasted on you."

Kaminari takes Kirishima's laughter as the utmost betrayal. He closes the door and opens it again onto the hallway so he can run out and whine to Ashido and Sero. Kirishima sends Bakugou another secret smile, and then turns his face to the ceiling.

"House," he says sternly, "Bakugou is our guest. I want you to let him in the library from now on, okay?"

The house rumbles grudgingly. Kirishima gives Bakugou an expectant look.

"What?"

"Say thank you."

"Ha! As if." Bakugou flips off the manor at large, and the windowpanes rattle in a grumpy, familiar way that he takes to be a general flip off back. When he opens the door, the library has returned.

It's nothing special. Smaller than the parlor. More like an appropriated bedroom, with only one circular window for light. But wall to wall, floor to ceiling the whole

place is crammed, cramped, wedged and overflowing with books, big and small and leatherbound, dyed red or blue or brown. So much for getting some rest.

Bakugou runs a hand along the spines. "Not half bad. Got anything here on curse breaking?"

Kirishima perks up and starts bounding around like a two ton puppy. He plucks thin, worn volumes from various shelves, handling them with unexpected care.

"These are kiddie tales," Bakugou says, grimacing, and Kirishima shrugs, suddenly bashful.

"Toyomitsu read a lot, said it was important. Tamaki read more. They taught me a little."

"And your other brother?"

"Tetsu. He was like me. We mostly read these."

Bakugou flips through one. Ugh. Fairy tales. He sighs as heavily as he can. "Let's get to work, then."

Together they take the library apart, book by book and tome by tome. The circle of sunlight marks their progress, trailing them slowly around the room. Most of the books are useless. A scant few have serious historical reference to magic and curse work, though never any solutions. Every now and then Kirishima will bring him a book and a question about a word, or a passage, and Bakugou will explain it impatiently. Kirishima won't get it, and then Bakugou will explain again, a little less impatiently.

Most often they return to the fairy tales, much to Bakugou's chagrin. They're all thoroughly typical. Knights and dragons and curses broken by clever riddles or true love's kiss. Heroic princes and princesses leaping to each other's rescue. Altogether stupid and not even a little bit useful, because this is real life, but Kirishima is never anything less than bursting with excitement, and Bakugou can't bring himself to snap as fiercely as he means to. Every page with mention of dragons is dog-eared; any story that includes that old school knight Sir Crimson Riot is soft and worn and well-loved. It's the easiest thing in the world to imagine a boy with red eyes laying in the single roving patch of sun and parsing through every tale of bravery, chivalry, and adventure.

Eventually Sero knocks on the doorframe to warn them that they're up for patrol soon. After he leaves, Kirishima says, "Thanks, Bakugou."

"For what," Bakugou says back. He's skimming through a flimsy history on All Might and the sword. All the usual stuff: banishing darkness from the land, saving countless towns and cities, yada yada, with a surplus of magical hearsay mixed in. Wielding holy fire, breaking curses, even healing the hurt and broken-hearted. It's impossible to tell what's real and what's just more fairy tale farce, but the old adage is ever the same: the sword will only wake for those who are worthy. Bakugou's mouth starts to sour.

"Y'know," Kirishima continues. "Thanks for helping me. Not making fun of me for not being so good at this."

"I did make fun of you."

"Yeah, but you didn't, really."

He's right. Bakugou didn't, really.

He returns to the book with a huff. Some of the sourness has gone. "You've got brains up there. Instead of being afraid you don't have them, you should try using them once in a while."

Kirishima doesn't say anything to this, and when Bakugou lifts his head, he finds him beaming.

"What?"

"You've got a nice smile." He says it very simply, without an ounce of shame.

Bakugou's first thought is *I'm not smiling shut the fuck up*, but that would just sound juvenile, because lo and behold, he *is* smiling. Unsure how else to respond, he chucks the book at Kirishima's head. It is less effective than he intended and Kirishima just laughs, and starts squinting his way through the book when it falls open on his lap. He says, "Wow. Look at all the good you'll do when you wake up the sword."

The sourness evaporates from Bakugou's tongue entirely.



Admitting that he doesn't want to kill Kirishima is...freeing, in ways Bakugou didn't expect. Suddenly he is able to admit his fascination with his eyes. Gem-like indeed; one day he drops his sword in the middle of a spar (yes, fine, a *spar*) to grab Kirishima's face in both his hands, ignoring his surprised yelp.

Ruby, he thought first, or maybe garnet. From this close, nose to nose, he sees he was wrong. His eyes are more like diamonds, wine red, multi-faceted and capturing the light from a source he can't pinpoint, splintering it and sending it back out. A kaleidoscope. An iridescent universe caught in each eye.

"What, uh." Kirishima blinks several times. Seriously, it's absurd how big they are. Each one would be worth a fortune. "What's up, Bakugou?"

Bakugou grunts. He lets go of Kirishima's face, scoops up his sword and attacks in one smooth motion. Kirishima scrambles to catch up, but he's still off his guard, and he ends up on the ground with the sword beneath his chin. Bakugou grins down at him.

"Your eyes are badass," he says, "and you're a punk for letting a little attention distract you."

Kirishima makes an offended noise, and then he kicks his leg out and sweeps Ba-



kugou's feet from beneath him. Bakugou swears, and he swears some more when Kirishima swoops in above him, one hand pinning his sword arm and the other held sharp against the soft of his throat, a tucked thumb and four fingers like knives and pressing just gently.

"First of all, I'm not a punk. Second, your eyes are pretty badass too."

"Fuck you, all of me is badass."

Kirishima offers his hand and levers Bakugou up. His smile is crooked and wide—fearsome, Bakugou might have thought before, but he sees now that Kirishima is just happy. Happier than he usually is, even. A thought takes root in Bakugou's mind. He starts to practice his footwork, running through slow strikes at invisible villains. Dodging the woman's knives here. Skewering the annoying cowl guy there. He can feel Kirishima's eyes on him like a brand, but at the moment pinning down this thought is more important than telling him to quit staring. He practices and he thinks and he says, "Your teeth. They're badass too."

"Ha ha, thanks," Kirishima says, and it almost is that easy. Then, at the last second: "Probably not as badass as you with that sword, though. The way you move—like it's a part of you, I've never seen anything like it."

Bakugou twitches. He is about to get into the stupidest argument of all time, and what he hates, because he will probably die if he is not actively hating something, is that he doesn't hate it. "Your arms are *literally* a part of you, dumbass, you want to talk about badass you should take a look at your *spear hands* sometime."

"Not as badass as your confidence in a fight. Hell, outside of a fight, too." Kirishima slams his fists together. "It's inspiring."

"Of course I'm confident, I'm amazing. Why the hell aren't you *more* confident? Fighting you is like fighting a goddamn *mountain*."

"Which is almost as cool someone who can take on a mountain and win."

Bakugou spins around. The whistle of the sword through the air cuts abruptly into ringing silence as Kirishima catches the blade in one hand, dead stop. The impact drives the breath from Bakugou's lungs. His grin is all teeth, wild and triumphant.

"Pretty badass mountain."

He lowers the sword but does not step back. They're standing very close, and the moment gains its own gravity, weighs down Bakugou's insides to the molten core. Then the automatons stroll up to watch the match, and they break apart. Bakugou's breath shudders in his lungs. He uses the unspent energy tingling in his limbs and swoops into an attack, and Kirishima, caught off guard at first, rolls with it and throws Bakugou off. He's still smiling.

They trade wins until they lose count, the automatons cheering and heckling in turn, and afterward Kirishima is *still* smiling. He turns his arms over and over, admiring them in a way Bakugou has never seen before. The thought from earlier blooms behind his eyes: he likes making Kirishima feel good. It makes *him* feel

good. Backwards as hell, but fuck it. He's not complaining.



In Bakugou's dreams, he is running. There are hands and the hands are reaching—and then, for the first time, the backdrop takes shape, and form, and color. He crashes into the greenhouse and slams the door, and the hands are left groping on the other side.

He catches his breath. He turns around.

The glass is dark, and the stem is bare, and all the rose's petals are dust.

When he wakes, he goes straight there, not bothering to wait for the sweat to cool on his neck. The house takes pity, such that he opens the back door and steps into the greenhouse. The roses look better than they did; less wild, thorns smaller. Kirishima has been pruning them. That foreign feeling of inadequacy is less, but it's still there. Beside the fountain sits the glass and the flower, unshattered.

Bakugou tries to take comfort in this, and tries to ignore that there are only four petals left, clinging to the stem.



On the grounds after another long session attacking the barrier together, Kirishima sits on the grass, dumbfounded.

"You want to do," he trails off. "A what?"

"A party!" Ashido squeals. "Like the old days, except just us. And Bakugou!"

She hooks an arm around Bakugou's neck before he can duck away, and digs copper knuckles into his scalp. Her reflexes are improving. This would reflect well on Bakugou's teaching skills if he weren't on the receiving end of it.

"That sounds great, you guys," says Kirishima, "but I'm not sure Bakugou wants to—"

"Actually, it was Bakugou's idea," Sero snickers, because he has a death wish. Before Bakugou can fulfill it, Kirishima touches his hand.

"Was it really?" he says. He's bright-eyed with joy, and Bakugou's neck starts to heat. He snatches his hand away and sorely misses his cloak with the fur collar.

"Hell, don't make a whole thing out of it. You said you threw parties for the whole town, which doesn't make a whit of goddamn sense, this place isn't that big. I was just curious."

The automatons boo him. "Weak! Can't you at least come up with a better excuse?"

"What about patrol?" Kirishima asks, and Bakugou grimaces.

"The freaks are holding off on attacking, and it's not because our numbers intimidate them. I think they want me to go to them willingly. We should be fine for one night."

He flips off the forest. The automatons whoop and mimic him. Then they start whispering amongst themselves. This instantly puts Bakugou's teeth on edge, which is absolutely the right reaction because then they split off to tug Bakugou and Kirishima in opposite directions, babbling about preparations to be made. All the way back to the house, Kirishima glances over his shoulder to grin goofily at Bakugou like the clingy manchild he is. Bakugou, on the other hand, has both self respect and self control, which is why he only looks over his shoulder twice.

When Bakugou first suggested a ball, he assumed, like an idiot, that all this would entail was some chatting and dancing in the dining hall, or parlor. He was wrong.

First thing's first, apparently: dressing up. Ashido drags him from room to room, turning out wardrobes and closets like a mini hurricane. Bakugou feels like a child's play-thing, primed and preened against his will, tugging outfits on and off at her leisure, turning in place for her critique. It's humiliating, but eventually she finds The One. It's richly, deeply gold, black-buttoned and double-breasted, with a waistcoat that has roses embroidered up the sides and weaving around to meet in the front and back. Ashido is beside herself with glee. Regrettably, Bakugou doesn't hate it either.

Next: announcing the guests. Ignore the fact that there are only five of them here, and only one of them is a guest. According to Sero this would ideally be done while descending from the top of a grand staircase, but since the house refuses to compromise on the point of Bakugou's stair privileges, they have to settle for the large double doors leading to the front or back exits of the manor.

The automatons announce each other first—Bakugou can hear them through the door, tacking five titles onto each of their names—and then Kaminari's declares with tinny flair: "Sir Bakugou Katsuki, of the Todoroki kingdom!"

The doors open and Bakugou saunters in, to a smattering of applause from the three guests-slash-staff. On the other side of the hall, Ashido clears her throat. "Presenting: Lord Kirishima Eijirou."

The doors open, and there is Kirishima. He's done up in blue, with high collar and gold trim. Red is more his color, but there's only so much choice when working with the wardrobe of Sir Toyomitsu "Fatgum" Taishiro, a bear of a man known for defeating opponents with his bulk alone, and the only one whose clothes fit a cursed Kirishima. Still, Bakugou has to admit it's a good look for him.

Then he starts walking, and it's. Huh. Well. It's awkward as hell, is what it is. He doesn't walk so much as he waddles, kind of slinging his weight one way and then the other, without bending at the elbows or knees. After a lot of staggering and bumbling, Kirishima meets him halfway, at which point Bakugou is openly smirking. "You look comfortable."

"Uh, yeah." Kirishima tugs at his collar with one sharp finger, careful not to slice

the fabric. "It's real, uh. Starchy."

"That's what you get for only wearing pants for two years." Or ten, considering. Bakugou bats Kirishima's fidgeting hands away from the collar and smooths out the wrinkles himself. "Looks nice," he concedes, and then punches him in the shoulder to balance it out.

The sun rises across Kirishima's face. "Thanks, Bakugou. You look amazing."

"Ahem hem hem," says Sero, in his best hoity toity court voice. "Dinner," and he sweeps into a bow, "is served."

They pour into the dining room. The automatons have pulled out all their brand new cooking skills to put together a real feast, and the best dish by far is Kaminari's roasted tomatoes. Bakugou tells him not to let it go to his head, but it's no use. He shines like a freshly minted gold coin.

It's way too much food for one person to eat, but it's only half edible anyway, so that evens out. Kirishima shoves a good portion down his gullet, and the rest the dunces pretend to eat like kids playing tea party, tucking the food away into various compartments and saying things like "ooh, delicious, good show sir, how scrumptious, well done, hear hear."

"You're all disgusting," Bakugou declares, and can't even pretend it isn't fond.

By the time dinner concludes Ashido is doing her best imitation of a tea kettle. She is steaming so fiercely that every joint is whistling. "Time for dancing!"

Bakugou has been to the fancy court balls. As a royal knight he didn't have much choice. There was dancing, and it was elegant and regimented and pompous and Bakugou hated it more than he hates most things, which is saying something. When the automatons declared it was time to dance, he should have known it would be nothing like the fancy court balls.

The furniture in the parlor is pushed to the fringes of the room, and the automatons, after bowing to each other for a minute straight, start to dance. One of them is always off to the side, warbling a song that they very well may be making up on the spot, and then they saunter over and tap one of the others on the shoulder, all snooty-like, and ask to cut in. Some hand kissing. More bowing. Another bad song. Bad dancing. Repeat ad nauseum.

It looks stupid. It looks *terrifically* stupid. It also looks kind of fun.

Kirishima elbows him, gently. "Why don't you join them?"

"I don't dance."

Kirishima guffaws. "What do you mean you can't dance? Anyone can dance."

"I didn't say I *can't*, I said I *don't*."

"Right. My mistake."





"Bakugou," says Kirishima.

He's packing, except, hell, there's nothing to pack! Isn't that the damndest thing? All the clothes, all the food, the cooking and cleaning supplies, the favors and the gifts—none of it's *his*. None of this was ever his. He was trapped here with nothing but the sword strapped to his back, and that's how he'll leave it. Still he thunders from room to room, locating one crusty old boot, finally, and then the other. The cloak with the fur collar: tear mended poorly by Sero, wrinkles steamed poorly by Ashido, folded poorly by Kaminari, based on the static shock when he shakes it out. It was shoved beneath a bed in a guest room that he's never even slept in. How the hell did it get there? The damndest thing! Ha!

"Bakugou."

Kirishima again. Maybe there's a pleading note in his voice. Bakugou is buckling the sword across his spine and Kirishima is standing behind him, feet planted, arms crossed. The three morons are hovering outside the door, peeking in every few seconds like children both terrified and fascinated by a fight between parents. Bakugou does not turn. Why should he? He is a meteor, he is an explosion, he is an unstoppable force and he does not have a heart.

He really doesn't. If that kiss proved anything, it proved that.

"*Bakugou.*"

His lip lifts in a sneer. "What."

"You don't have to do this. We'll find another way. We'll break through the barrier."

"You know that'll never work. Even if it did, we don't have the time."

"Then we'll destroy the rose. I don't know why the kiss didn't work, but—"

Bakugou turns on him. "Don't patronize me, don't you fucking dare. We both know I'm not—" His voice breaks. He will not forgive himself for that. "Not *worthy*."

"That can't be it." He says it just like that. Simple and uncompromising and Bakugou laughs. He doesn't want to. He doesn't mean to. But it barks out of him, cruel, involuntary, he laughs until his gut cramps, he laughs until he's snarling.

"Oh, would you just grow *up*? I'm not your knight in shining armor, Kirishima, this isn't that kind of story. I'll break this curse *my* way."

Kirishima looks wounded, and then he looks angry. When Bakugou storms out of the room, he follows, the automatons trailing behind.

"You want to lecture me about growing up? Not everything is about you, Bakugou. It's not your curse, it's ours. You just stumbled in. Maybe it has nothing to do with you! Maybe it's not that you're unworthy, maybe it's—"

"Maybe it's about how *you're* too much of a *monster*, is that it? Or maybe it's about your shit self confidence," Bakugou turns on him, gets right in his face.

"You're not a monster. You're strong, and you're brave, and you're *good*, okay,

you're just too damn *good*, but you'd be ten times better if you believed in yourself even half as much as these idiots do, or as much as I—"

He stops himself. Jerks his chin down and kneels to lace his boots properly, without another word. When he comes back up Kirishima kisses his cheek.

It is almost exactly like being kissed by a brick wall. His mouth is hard and quick and earnest, like the sweet rough thing he is. "Don't go," he says, and for one terrible moment, Bakugou betrays himself, and wonders what Deku would do.

But there is no what would Deku do. Because Deku wouldn't be here. Deku would have broken the curse and saved the knight's second son and all his friends. Deku would be worthy.

He pulls away. This time Kirishima does not follow.

Just as he throws open the doors, Kirishima calls to him: "You're not a monster, either."

He sounds like his heart is breaking. Maybe Bakugou's is too.

Into the storm he charges. Monster or not, villain or not, worthy or not—all Bakugou knows is that he will not let these fools rot in this fucking place. He will get them out. He will at least give them that. At the treeline, soaked to the skin, he bellows into the dark, "Hey, bastards! I'm done pretending to be what I'm not! You want me? Come and get me!"

For a moment, there is quiet. And then there is silence. The dark becomes complete. In the root of his tongue Bakugou can taste his pulse, hammering faster and faster and faster—

Far off, between the trees: a flickering blue flame.

The smell of nothingness rushes over him, and the world tears open. Horror slows things down, drags it out; he can do nothing but stare as a hand reaches out from the swirling mist. Behind him, Kirishima shouts. He turns, and when Kirishima reaches for him he starts to reach back, but it's laughably too late. The hand snags his collar and drags him through the gate, and then it's dark, and then it's darker.



Bakugou is choking on darkness. It presses in, crowds into his lungs, fills them up like tar. He can still feel the hands on him. Just when he thinks he'll drown, the dark buckles and gives way, and he falls heavily to the earth.

It's cold here, and dry. There are thick roots white-knuckled under his fingers. He's in the forest. He's out of the curse.

He has to take a minute to cough his lungs out, regain the use of his limbs and senses. There are people shifting around him. With watering eyes he counts half a dozen pairs of boots at least. It occurs to him, for the first time, that in the heat of the moment he may have committed a grievous error.

Shigaraki is looking down at him the way one might look at a dying animal. Not disgust, or even pity, so much as morbid curiosity. He looks like a corpse himself: wisping white hair, thin skin, creased and cracked and dry. He's so pale against the blackness of the forest that it nearly hurts to look at him. Red eyes—not like Kirishima's. Maybe more like Bakugou's himself.

On either side Shigaraki is flanked by the cowl and the woman with the dead eyes. Directly behind Bakugou, with picture perfect posture, is a man made of smoke—their gate wizard. And on either side of him is a hulking woman, a member of the lizard folk, and a man wearing a tall hat and mask—another magician, hell, how many do they have? Last, and furthest away, a man is stoking a little blue campfire. He says, "About time," and he stands, stretches, and lopes over. There's blue fire circling his wrists, crawling along his scalp. Black smoke vents from leathery scars. A curse, Bakugou realizes, not unlike Deku's prince. He doesn't seem as eager to break it. He hauls Bakugou to his feet by the collar and the fur singes in his hand, and that's enough of fucking that.

Bakugou draws the sword and tries to take the man's arm, but he dodges behind a blast of heat and ash. When the smoke clears he's slouching over Shigaraki's shoulder, looking unimpressed.

"I get the feeling this kid's not as enthusiastic to join us as he let on, boss," he drawls.

"No shit," spits Bakugou, and puffs up bigger than he feels. He has to free Kirishima—he has to wake the sword or find the witch. He doesn't have time to trifle with these freaks. It's the same as it ever was: the only way out is through. "How the hell gullible bastards like you expect to take over the world, I'll never know. Now get out of my way before I make you."

They all look to Shigaraki, who only looks thoughtful. Then he reaches over his shoulder and draws a sword of his own.

It's an enormous, dreadful thing. As beaten and weathered as Bakugou's, but it's alive, and it's whole, and it's pulsing with malice. Wave after wave of nothingness bombards Bakugou's senses, so powerful that he trips back a step, choking on it. It draws the dark in. It *stares* at him, not like Kirishima's curse at all, and it is ravenous. Bakugou knows instantly who it belonged to.

"What," Shigaraki flashes a nasty longtoothed smile, "you didn't think you were the only one with a sword of legend, did you?"

Let it never be said that Bakugou doesn't put up a fight. He's brutal, unforgiving, and he cuts deep into the big woman's shoulder and takes chunks of the lizardman and the magician before Shigaraki intervenes. With one swing, Bakugou's unwoke blade cracks in two. The broken half turns to dust before it hits the ground.

They wrestle Bakugou down and lash him to a tree after that. He keeps a hand on the pommel of the broken sword, but they only allow it because it doesn't matter. The sword is dead. It will never wake. It's over.



"Someone else might say you're more trouble than you're worth," Shigaraki says. "But I see this—" He crouches in front of him, and gestures to where the firebrand is cauterizing the wounded, "and I see potential. You're exactly what my master needs."

Bakugou doesn't answer. His gaze is fixed to the sword, trying to come up with a plan and failing. Failing.

"It's too bad about All Might's sword, but let's be honest, it wasn't doing you any favors. You weren't worthy, right? It would never have woken for you."

He spins his sword and stabs it into the ground with such force that Bakugou feels the tremors in the earth.

"*This* sword, though. All for One's sword. It would wake for you, as it woke for me. We could share it, and the glory, in the way you could never share All Might's sword with that pretender hero, Midoriya. We would be unstoppable. You just have to accept it."

Through his teeth: "Go fuck yourself."

The parchment of Shigaraki's face crinkles, and his pale knuckles go paler on his sword. Bakugou prepares himself to die.

Then Shigaraki exhales, and the tension breaks. He leans back on his heels, his whole body working into a slouch. "That's all right. You can take your time. We'll talk about something else." He casts around for a subject. Then, almost casually, "You know, I've heard of the lord of that manor. Big guy, right? A real knight. Famous. Chivalrous. Boring."

Bakugou snaps to attention.

"Your friend, though. He definitely wasn't that knight. Much more interesting. I saw him through the gate—he was more like you, wasn't he? More like *us*. A monster."

Bakugou thrashes. It's involuntary and completely futile. "Leave him out of this!"

"You love him," gasps the woman with the empty eyes. She skips up and Shigaraki obligingly slinks back, moving to warm his hands by the fire. The woman—Toga—her eyes aren't empty now, Bakugou realizes. They're brimming with rotten, over-ripe joy. "Oh, I *love* love. Don't worry. I'll make sure he bleeds pretty, just for you."

She dances back from Bakugou's gnashing teeth, delighted.

"Touched a nerve, huh?" says Shigaraki. His hands make the dry, rasping sounds of brittle paper when they slide together. "I understand. Even monsters have those who are precious to them. You could say we're something of a family ourselves."

He flexes his fingers one last time, then walks back over. As he does, he lays a hand on the shoulders of each of his comrades. Most of them lean into his touch. It's cultish and horrible, and if this is love, it's the rotten kind that would raze the

world for a laugh. Bakugou wants no part of it.

"Here's the deal. You join our family, or we'll go pay your pet monster a visit, see if he's game instead."

A thoughtful pause.

"Or we'll just kill him," he says easily. "Whichever comes first."

Bakugou howls. "Don't touch him—*don't you touch him*—"

"I guess that settles it."

Shigaraki rounds them up, and the gate wizard warps the night into a swirling portal. One by one they step through, and as they vanish Bakugou's vision narrows and narrows.

"My good friends Mr. Compress and Toga will keep you company," Shigaraki says, and the woman pouts, and the magician bows low. "Let them know when you make your decision, and they'll pass along the message. Better hurry, though. They won't have Kurogiri's gate, and it's a long walk to the manor. Who knows what might happen by then."

"*Shigaraki!*" Bakugou bellows, but he's already gone.

The magician flexes his injured arm. "The maestro says I may do as I please to repay you the favor so long as you are not permanently damaged."

"I wish I could have gone with them." The woman smiles dreamily at Bakugou. "I want to keep my promise to you. Tell me more about him, this monster you love. I remember the funny little dolls said his name—was it Kirishima?"

"Get his name out of your mouth," Bakugou snarls. She doesn't deserve it, it has to be earned. This isn't right. This isn't right. In the nightmares, the hands were never reaching for anyone else. Never for Kirishima. The villains are still talking, threatening, but it's white noise. Blood pulses so hard in Bakugou's head that his vision swims with it, he can't see anything, can't hear anything but the crashing of his pulse—

The crashing—

That crashing isn't him.

The trees groan and creak and *bend* to make way for two figures: a witch, complete with staff, hat, and cloak, and a knight wielding half of a double-edged greatsword, broken lengthwise along the fuller. A golden line of eternal flame smolders across the breadth of the break.

Oh. Oh, this is *too good*.

The knight says, "Unhand this villager, villains, and no harm will come to you," and then his eyes catch Bakugou's, and his jaw drops.

The baffled knight says, "Kacchan?"

It's Deku. Of *course* it's Deku. Who else would it be?

Bakugou strangles out a laugh, and Deku's surprised expression collapses into a grimace. "Don't worry, we'll get you out."

Bakugou laughs harder.

The magician, now several paces away and balancing neatly on the bough of a tree, bows again, and lower. "Truly an honor to make your esteemed acquaintance, Sir Knight, but I'm afraid we must be leaving. Toga! The maestro will want to hear of this."

The woman is not ready to leave. There is the manic gleam of adoration in her eye. "It's you! I know you. I love you. I'd love to kill you."

Faster than a drawn breath she throws no less than four daggers, but the witch is not to be discounted. Her fingers flicker and her staff glows, and knife after knife are sent veering off into the night. The magician swears. He snaps his fingers, and from some concealed otherspace more knives burst into existence, falling neatly into the woman's hands.

What the witch cannot fend off, Deku parries. His form, his footwork are perfect, and Bakugou's insides seize. This isn't the quivering ball of puss he knows. This is a stranger.

With a deft jab and twist Deku disarms her, and before the magician can conjure more weapons Deku swipes at her feet. She clears it with a single backwards bound, but, no, he wasn't going for her legs at all—a stream of holy fire lashes out at the ground, and where it burns the earth splits open. The woman doesn't hesitate. She vaults across the divide, and before the fire licks her heels, before the witch can repel her, before Deku can cut her in two, the magician snaps his fingers and she vanishes.

"I'm afraid we must bow out," the magician says, and tips his cap. "But I'm sure we'll meet again." He melts into the shadows before the witch's next spell can ensnare him. Then it's quiet, with only Bakugou's thready laughter to stitch together the silence.

Deku turns to him. Now that the fighting is over, the old simpering uncertainty has retaken his face, but beneath that there's steel. One careful stroke and Bakugou's binds slice cleanly in two. No sooner is he free than he is on top of Deku, tackling him to the ground and pummeling, and laughing, and shouting himself hoarse. He is blinded, he is *suffocating* on his rage.

"Kacchan, stop—!"

"This is *priceless*!" Deku. His miserable, pitiful face. His bleeding, worthy heart. "As though I need your help, you insignificant *bug*!"

He cracks Deku across the jaw with the hilt of the dead sword, and Deku is so stunned to see it shattered that he doesn't even cry out.

The witch does. Bakugou's guts give a sudden swoop, and then he is weightless, floating, unmoored.

"Put me down, you damned witch! I'll kill you!"

The witch balks. "Well, that's a really good reason not to put you down!"

Upside down, still struggling and swearing, he gets a better look at her: she is round-faced but weathered, her eyes are bright but her hat and cloak are beaten. Her pink hat. A witch, here, in the cursed forest, in a pink hat.

Bakugou's insides go cold. "It was *you*."

He floats past a tree, and he twists, gets the trunk beneath his feet. Her eyes flicker wide with understanding. He launches at her.

"You're the witch that trapped them there!" They tumble through the air, Deku flailing uselessly in the background, no surprise. "You ruined their lives and then you got caught up in Deku's fairy tale horseshit instead of cleaning up your mess!"

"That's why I'm here now!"

Her eyes are big and dark and solemn, and unafraid. She lets the spell go. They hit the ground with a resounding thud and Bakugou rolls back to his feet, gets his knuckles in her cloak and brings her nose to nose.

"*Fix it.*"

Deku has stopped flailing. "Let her go," he orders, actually fucking *orders*, but the witch holds up a hand. Her eyes never once leave Bakugou.

"The curse is set and binding. I can't lift it."

The regret on her face is painfully genuine. Bakugou does not *care*, he does not give a single *shit*. "Then *break* it, damn you, I don't care how—"

"That's what I've been trying to tell you," she says. There's a strange smile hiding in the dimples of her pink cheeks, like she's frustrated but amused with him. "I can't break it, but maybe *he* can."

Him. Deku.

Bakugou is possessed of one thought: if it weren't for Deku, none of this would have happened. If not for Deku, the sword would be his, and he would be worthy. If not for Deku, he would never have drawn Shigaraki's eye. He would never have gone on this fool's quest, and he would never have lost days, weeks, months of his life to a curse that wasn't even his.

And he would never have met Kirishima.

Straightforward, stupid, unbreakable Kirishima. Kirishima who deserves someone good, and at the very god damn least, Bakugou has never pretended to be that.

But Deku. Deku is good. Deku is worthy. Deku could save him.

Bakugou shuts his eyes.

"Deku."

His grip on the witch's cloak twists and tightens, and then his fists flinch open, and she floats neatly to her feet.

"Your curse-breaker. You really think it can free them?"

Deku, who has just begun to relax, immediately starts babbling. "I don't think that's exactly accurate, Kacchan. The stories don't really get it right, Prince Todoroki broke his own curse, the sword just helped out. If you study All Might's legends, there's an alternate way of reading it that focuses less on *destroying evil* than *saving the kingdom*, which leads me to believe the sword's *real* power is less for destruction or curse-breaking and more for healing, so if we can repair the effects of the curse then maybe we can—"

Bakugou begins to growl.

"—er, that is to say, yes, Kacchan. I'm confident All Might's sword can help your.." he hesitates, "friends."

Bakugou doesn't bother explaining, though that's clearly what he's fishing for. His time here belongs to him, and Kirishima, and the automatons. No one else. "Then I'll help you. If you don't break that curse you're dead."

Deku says, "How do you know Shigaraki?"

"He wants to recruit me." He ignores the scandalized gasp. Walks to the charred scar Deku's sword left in the ground. "When I said no, they decided to use the idiots at the manor as leverage."

But it's not charred. The earth inside the gash is rich and loamy, ready for planting. All around it, grass is growing, and flowers are rising. It is a power Bakugou has never seen, has never thought of. He considers throwing away the dead remains of his half of the sword. Fits "The two freaks will warn them," he says, and fits what's left of the sword back into the scabbard.

"This is my forest," says the witch. She retrieves her staff, dropped in her tussle with Bakugou. "We'll get there first."

The end of the staff begins to glow, and all the trees bow to her.



The manor is burning.

Into the storm it wails, shattered windows and straining beams and groaning, gasping doorways. A beacon in the dark, streaking the rain, the ground, the automatons fighting for their lives in burning blue. Bakugou must be mad, because amid the tableau of horror, he finds himself comforted to be back in the familiar howl of the storm.



The automatons are battered and sheared open, but they're holding their own. It's clear the invaders didn't expect to meet such a fight: Ashido keeps them at bay with jets of boiling water, Sero darts around binding wrists and ankles, and Kaminari zaps and burns anyone who gets too close with the sparking ends of his wrists. How did he already lose both of his hands? They see him, and their cries of joy rivals the crack of thunder. Then Bakugou sees Kirishima.

He's on the roof with Shigaraki, backlit by flame and lightning. Huge chunks of the roof have burned through, inviting anyone who stumbles too close to fall to the immolating belly of the house. Kirishima's arms are scarred—deeply, horribly, cracked and chipped and peeled open, revealing the bright red ore beneath. With every stroke of Shigaraki's sword, another plate of Kirishima's armor turns to dust.

"Kirishima!" Bakugou screams, but Kirishima cannot hear him.

Deku and the witch peel off to help the automatons. Bakugou makes for the house. He dodges blows from the hulking woman. He rolls beneath jets of the cursed man's flames. He claws his way out of a pile of the cowl's copies, and he dives into the burning, ravaged house.

The house knows it's him. Bakugou is certain it does, because for the first time there are the stairs at the end of the hall. As he climbs he hears their voices, ricocheting down from above:

"*Where is he!*" Kirishima.

"This again." Shigaraki. "Why do you *care*? You're a perfect killing machine, just like us. A monster. Attachments would only weigh you down. You don't need him."

"I'm nothing like you," But he doesn't sound so sure. He sounds desperate. "And neither is Bakugou. Where is he? Bring him back!"

"*Ah.*" A sound like revelation. "You love him. Or are you just selfish? Twice and Toga told me all about it, you know. A curse that traps whatever innocent traveler happens upon it. What terrible thing could you have done to warrant such a punishment? What terrible thing *are you* to ensnare a knight, and then beg to ensnare him again once he finally gets free?"

A burning beam plummets from the ceiling. Bakugou dives away but it crashes through the stairs, leaving a yawning chasm in its wake. He has to cross it. He has no choice.

Smoke fills his lungs as he takes a running leap. His foot lands on the other side and plummets through, and down he plunges, until he hooks what's left of his sword into what's left of the banister. The sudden stop nearly yanks his shoulder from its socket. He heaves himself slowly, painstakingly back up. Almost there. Almost there.

On the roof, Kirishima is yelling, "I don't want to hurt you. Just give Bakugou back and leave!"

There's a sharp crack, and a pained cry. Then Shigaraki: "*Hurt* me? You can't hurt

me. I will flay you alive. I will reduce you to dust.” He laughs. “You’re right. You’re no monster. You’re a *coward*. Pathetic. Weak. Master has no use for phlegm like you.”

Bakugou bursts onto the roof, and everything goes still.

Shigaraki has one boot on Kirishima’s chest, the sword hefted high above his head. One of Kirishima’s horns is snapped clean off. His arms are held up to shield his face, but they are bare, hacked away to the raw red mineral beneath.

Kirishima’s eyes meet his.

“Bakugou,” he whispers, and something changes. No magic. No curse. The change blooms in Kirishima like a rose, a transformation, an entirely human alchemy.

“I’m not a monster.”

Shigaraki slashes down with enough force to fell an oak, but Kirishima is a mountain, he is more, and he catches the sword. The shockwave blows back the rain. His arms are trembling, his hands are cracked to the bone, but he’s up on one knee, and he’s rising. He pushes Shigaraki back, back, to the burning edge of a cave in.

“I’m not a coward. I’m strong, and *you*—” He draws back a fist. “*You* can’t break me.”

The strike lands, and several things happen at once.

Shigaraki reels, stumbles back one step, two, and then his heel comes down on open air. He falls, and he falls, and he falls, and then the world opens up and swallows him in a swirl of dark mist. Bakugou barely sees any of it. He is watching Kirishima, who has begun to glow.

The map of his body, every closed scar, is overflowing with light. It’s brilliant, it’s blinding—and then it’s over, and when the afterimages seamed into Bakugou’s vision unravel, Kirishima is still there: soft-skinned and golden.



There is a story, and if the witch who cursed the knight’s second son were asked to tell it, she would tell it differently.

The story would be kinder, because the second son was kind. There was once a young witch, lost and afraid and barely in control of her magic. She was caught in the first summer storm, and she was alone.

But the second son of a knight offered her shelter. He and his friends gave her the warmth of their hearth, for she was cold and soaked to the skin. They gave her food, for she was hungry. And they gave her companionship, for she was starved with loneliness. The knight’s son was outgoing and straightforward, and when she told him her story, he empathized, and told her his own. He was cheerful, and brave, and kind. He was very kind.

He could not find that kindness for himself. She knew she had to thank him, but she did not know how. He refused payment in money, and in magic. So she offered him her friendship and a single undying rose—just a simple spell, just a trinket—and this he accepted with a smile.

She cast a spell, then, though she did not mean to. In her heart, as the rose passed from one hand to the other, she wished that the knight's son could learn to love himself.

But magic is rarely so straightforward. The simple spell cast on the rose took this wish and bloomed into an enchantment, twisted and crystalline and strange. The second son was transformed, until the facets of the rose reflected the facets of his heart reflected the facets of his new form: for as long as the second son believed himself to be a monster, he would appear as one. If he could not learn to love himself by the time the rose's last petal fell, the change would be permanent.

The young witch tried desperately to undo the spell, but it was too late. The roots of the enchantment ensnared the house, and all those within it. Her magic was great—greater than she could yet control. She did not know how to dispel such a powerful curse, especially one that had come so earnestly from her heart.

And so the witch left, after raising an enchanted forest to protect the village from the bounds of the curse, and to protect the second son from the wrath of the village. She promised to return once she'd learned how to control her magic. She did learn, and she did return. But she could not lift the curse. And though she brought a hero with her for that purpose, there were none alive who could. None but the second son himself.



Kirishima's head is down. He's looking at his hands.

Bakugou can't stop staring, at the curves and the dips and the muscle, all the scars he knows so well. Every brilliant human inch of him—he can't stop staring.

He calls out, and Kirishima lifts his head. He turns. He smiles.

And then his body—jerks, violently. Then again. Then again.

Over his shoulder, far back: Toga, her arm still poised from the throw. She's on the edge of the roof—she scaled the side of the manor, just like Bakugou did so long ago. Her grin is dagger sharp.

A gate of black mist blinks open behind her and snaps shut and she's gone, and it's quiet, and there are three knives buried in Kirishima's back.

He falls. Bakugou is not fast enough to catch him.

The storm is breaking.

"Kirishima! Kiri, Bakugou, you did it! They turned tail and ran, and we're back to..."

The footsteps behind them slow to a stop. "Hey, what's—" says Kaminari, and then he says nothing more.

"No," says Ashido. "No."

Bakugou is holding Kirishima. He doesn't know what else to do.

"You found me," Kirishima says. He touches Bakugou's face, and marvels, and laughs like a sigh. "Rain's warm."

It is, but it's fading. The curse is broken. The summer rain is giving way to a cooler, gentler mist.

"Kirishima," Bakugou says, and Kirishima smiles, with red in his teeth. His eyes are spinning out of focus.

"Wow, look at that sky. Makes you feel like—you can do anything."

Anything, Bakugou doesn't say. Anything. I don't want anything. I just want to save you. "Kirishima."

"Rain's warm." His eyes start to flutter.

"Kirishima," Bakugou croaks. "Eijirou."

He doesn't answer.

Bakugou bows over him, and hears the sword rattle free of the scabbard. He doesn't care. He holds Kirishima close. He breathes.

"Get Deku and the witch," he says. "I can't do anything for him, but maybe one of them can." No one moves. "Now, Sero."

Sero goes. Bakugou presses his mouth into Kirishima's hair, murmurs, "You're strong. You're going to live." Ashido says his name. He shuts his eyes. "You're going to live. You're strong, damn you, you're *strong*."

"Bakugou," Ashido whispers. "The sword is..."

The sword is waking.



There is a story, and it goes like this:

There was a monster, and there was a curse, and there was a knight. And there was a sword cracked in two, that woke only for the worthy.



Along the broken edge of steel is a smoldering flame. It thrums like a heartbeat in the palm of his hand. He expects it to smell like nothing, but he's wrong—it smells like rain, and stone. It's a scent Bakugou knows well, that fills up his chest and overflows with contentment. He knows suddenly what to do. The only thing.

Bakugou fits the edge of the sword to the center of Kirishima's chest. When he draws it back, he draws a blade of light, bathing them all in gold. What's left in Bakugou's hand when the light fades is a greatsword, halved neatly along the fuller, crested in flame as brilliant and warm as hope. The twin of Deku's sword. Bakugou drops it, and lays both his hands on Kirishima.

The wounds in his back are closed. He breathes a deep and swelling breath, and his eyes flutter open.

"Oh, hey!" he says, which is perhaps the stupidest thing he could say, and Bakugou is so glad he could cry, and does.

"Fucking Deku," he says, his breath shuddering. "He said it was all about healing. You're a bastard for proving him right."

"I'm not sure what you're talking about, but I'm pretty sure I was dying," Kirishima says. "I'm like, eighty five percent sure I was dying. And I wanted to say I love you, but I didn't get to 'cause everything got fuzzy, so I'll say it now. I love—"

Bakugou kisses him. He kisses him like he means to defeat him in battle, and Kirishima kisses him back like he means not to lose. He kisses him until an almighty weight crashes into his back, and then a second, and then a third, and a voice or three are sobbing, "You did it! You're alive!"

For the first time Bakugou's awareness expands past himself and Kirishima, to the human warmth of the automatons—once-automatons—and to the manor, which has gone quiet and docile, and to the very air, absent of ash or the trace scents of magic. When he breathes all he smells is rain and sharp winter chill. When he looks around, all he sees is a normal house, without a hint of foreboding, or a lick of smoke. In the distance he can see the village, because the dark forest is gone.

The curse is broken. They are free.

"I knew we were right to trust you!" says Ashido, which is bullshit. Her eyes are golden and her hair is the soft pink of the breaking dawn, and she has Bakugou in a headlock. "Look at you, all grown up and worthy and breaking curses!"

"Careful, if he beats you up now you won't just restore in the morning." Kaminari, grinning from ear to ear. He's amber-eyed and blond, with a dark streak like a lightning bolt. The curse has left lasting marks on both of them. Sero is the only one with natural dark hair and eyes, though his smile looks eerily similar to the painted grin of his cursed form. He says, "I think the real MVP is Kirishima. He took the leader on and *won*, I saw it from the grounds."

"And *he* broke the curse, not me," Bakugou adds. He expects himself to want the glory, but that cold and gnawing need is absent when he looks inside himself. He's just happy to see Kirishima, flushed and full of pride. He's just happy to be alive, with them, together.

Deku ruins it, of course.

"I'm so happy for you," he blubbers, idling awkwardly at the top of the stairs. The



witch is hovering over his shoulder. There's a cut on her brow but she's smiling, and wringing her hands.

"It's been a while, huh," she says.

Kirishima and the ex-automatons disentangle. Bakugou lets them face her without him, in part because it's not his place, and in part because he doesn't trust himself not to lose his temper again. Prying himself from Kirishima's side takes more effort than he thought it would, but he manages, and heads downstairs, with Deku close behind.

They descend into the uncursed house. There is no evidence of the battle or the raging inferno. Just a normal, two-story house, with a normal layout and rooms that don't change.

"How long were you here?" Deku asks.

Bakugou runs his fingers along the wood paneling, the glass panes. There's so much *light* now.

"Long enough."

They step out through the back, where the winter chill has already crept into the air. The hanging mist suffuses the world with peachy dawnlight, and Bakugou sees the greenhouse, and he feels only peace. Between his shoulder blades the sword responds, an encouraging warmth, a second heartbeat.

"I'm glad for you, Kacchan," Deku says, sending a wobbly smile Bakugou's way. He nods at the sword. "You'll be amazing."

Bakugou rolls his eyes as hard as he can. Fucking Deku. "Obviously."

"Kacchan, listen." Ugh, he's using his Serious Voice. "It feels like fate that Shigaraki was here. After lifting this curse, Uraraka and I were planning to go west to confront him. He means to bring back All for One. We could really use your help."

"What about your dumb prince?"

Deku's cheeks go ruddy red. "Prince Todoroki wanted to join us, but we agreed it's better he stay in the capital until we assess the threat."

Bakugou turns that over in his mind, and then the doors open behind them. Kaminari, Ashido, and Sero are bunched together, laughing. Kirishima and the witch have an arm around each other's shoulders. Their eyes are puffy and red, but they're smiling. He catches Kirishima's gaze, and *that* smile rivals the rising sun.

"Bakugou!"

He jogs over. Oh, okay, he's running. Shit. He's—

Bakugou actually says "*oof*," when Kirishima tackles him to the ground.

"I missed you," he says, his nose mashed into Bakugou's cheek.

"It's been—it's been *minutes*, you codependent freak—"

Kirishima kisses him, pointedly. "So what? I missed you."

His hair is tickling Bakugou's brow, and Bakugou captures a lock of it between forefinger and thumb. Kirishima seems to notice it for the first time. "Whoa, is my hair red?"

Okay, wow, actually the first time. "Obviously. How didn't you know that?"

"There's kind of been a lot going on, if you haven't noticed. Huh. It was black before. I thought it would be when I turned back."

Bakugou runs a hand through it, and Kirishima leans into his palm.

"Looks kinda dumb. Suits you." Against Kirishima's laughing mouth, he says, "Deku wants me to go west to take out Shigaraki. Your dad and brothers went west, didn't they?"

"Yeah, they did."

"Do you want—I mean—hell, you should—" Kirishima does not help him, because he's a bastard. "Look, do whatever the hell you want, okay, I'm just saying I wouldn't hate it if you tagged along."

"Gee, Bakugou, how romantic. How could I say no?" His snickering trails off. "What about the town? They're my responsibility."

"They've been fine without you the past two years. What do you want?"

All traces of the old insecurity leave his face. "I want to go west and find my family. What do *you* want?"

Bakugou headbutts him, and then hooks a hand around the back of his neck to keep him there. "I want you to come with me. Always. How's that for romantic?"

If Bakugou thought becoming human would in some way make Kirishima's eyes less big and gem-like, he was dead wrong. "How could I say no?"

"If you're sweeping Kiri off his feet, you have to sweep us too," Ashido calls to them. "We're a package deal!"

She and the others are doing cartwheels where the trees used to be. The witch is enchanting them, helping them float. Kirishima stands up and offers a hand.

"So?" he says. "Happily ever after?"

"Oh, *fuck* no." Bakugou takes his hand and gets to his feet. He doesn't let go. "We're just getting started."



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# From Chicken to Hawks

A *Chicken Little* AU by Sevan

If Hawks had to describe the end of the world, he would summarize it in one word: chaos. Terrifying, yet exhilarating chaos. This would definitely make a great story to tell his grandchildren, right? *'Grandpa, what did you do when you were in high school?'* *'Oh, you know, the usual: hanging out with my friends, finding out I was right all along about the sky falling apart, saving the world from an alien apocalypse... Nothing special, really.'*

That is, if he managed to survive the invasion.

At the start of his second year at UA High, red-shouldered hawk Takami Keigo could've never predicted the end of the world was just around the corner, ready to strike him and his loved ones. He had more mundane problems, like how tired he was of being called Chicken Little by everyone and their mother, no matter how much he pushed to be called Hawks instead, or how only his dad and his friends didn't treat him like garbage.

That attitude across the town started back when he was twelve; he had sent the town of Musutafu into collective hysteria after he sounded the alarm because something knocked him out of the sky while he was flying, just to find an acorn as only proof of having been hit with anything, and he just hadn't managed to live it down. Some people thought it was just his active imagination, some criticised him and his dad, saying it was a cry for attention.

Some people just enjoyed having someone to ridicule.

Even now, four years later, he was still being ostracised by his peers and neighbours. Mirko, a particularly energetic Himalayan rabbit that entertained herself with throwing things at his face at any given chance, came to mind easily as a notorious example. There was even a director that wanted to make a movie about the whole deal, which was a thing he couldn't stop even if he wanted to.

On top of that, not a week passed in which he didn't get a pep talk from principal Nezu about how it was such a shame he seemed to be lost, that he should think of his father before acting so reckless.

He was unbelievably tired from all the expectations placed on him because of who his dad was; if he had to listen to one more lecture about upholding his old man's values, he was going to snap.

Yagi Toshinori, a social care worker with big muscles and an even bigger heart, had rescued him when he was about five years old. The golden pheasant had ended up adopting him a year later, moving back to his hometown in an attempt to make a new start for little Keigo in a place he knew he would most certainly be safe in.

He couldn't remember much of his biological parents, who were not more than a foggy memory, and he never cared to ask. The man that had raised him was his family, and that's all that mattered to him.

His father was regarded as a local celebrity from back when he was a high school student, his multiple victories in diverse sport competitions still proudly displayed in UA High's trophy case. Combined with the career path he had chosen, his remarkable goal of 'saving people with a smile', made it so the whole town considered Yagi the closest one could be to a hero.

Everyone expected Keigo to follow his old man's steps, become a local legend of his own, but he just couldn't bring himself to do so. Having all those eyes on him, his every move questioned, sometimes felt outright suffocating.

Not to mention the emaciated and weak form his father had been reduced to, a daily reminder of one of the worst days of his life. The incident had etched a fear in Keigo that discouraged any heroic aspirations he might've held.

He had the memory of Yagi laying in a hospital bed ingrained into his brain. Six years ago, his old man had gone in with the police to get a bunch of kids away from a kidnapper known as All For One, the name the media decided to give him, and had to be ushered away with a nasty wound that almost cost him his life.

He had kept working despite his son begging for him to just retire, and the combination with the acorn incident two years after the injury had caused a rift between them to a point neither of them would've ever thought possible.

So no, being a hero just wasn't for him. He'd much rather hang out with his friends, ignoring the people that said they were nothing but a bad influence, and have fun running around the town late at night, sharing secrets and making memories. He wanted to try to figure out his life, his destiny, at his own pace.

He wanted to fly free.

But he still wanted to be respected, and for his father to stop having to worry about him. Even if he told his friends he didn't care, the fact of the matter was that he actually did. A whole lot, actually. That's when he had what he considered to be his best idea ever.

He enrolled in the baseball team.

Despite his best efforts and the training he had been enduring with the help of his friends, he was still shunned from his peers, always outshined by Mirko. He would lay on the rooftop of his house every night, praying to the stars for a little help.

In the final game, a miracle happened.

He was the last resort, the last animal who could still stand after several of his teammates had been injured. Against all odds, against the screams from the coach and all the townspeople, he swung his bat at the ball, and hit it just right, enough for the team to score the much-needed two runs to win the game.



And for a day, one glorious day, Takami Keigo learnt how it was to be regarded not as a shame, or as the town's laughingstock, but as a hero. His father had taken the day off work to come watch the event, and despite the recent distance between them, it still meant a lot to Keigo that he was there for him.

That day, it was like any of the distance between them had never been there. They joked and laughed, and it felt like everything was right again. The next day would be a new day, a brighter day, and while he kept his cool about it and pretended it was nothing special, Keigo was thrilled that he could turn a new page.

But life always seemed to get in his way, and that night was no exception.

Hawks was sitting by his window, thanking the stars for the extra boost, when he got hit in the head with something that almost knocked him unconscious. He quickly stood up and looked around but couldn't see anything out of the ordinary. Thinking someone was pulling just another prank to remind him yet again about 'the sky is falling' fiasco, he kicked the roof in frustration, only to swear loudly at the pain that shot up and made his leg feel numb.

He crouched and touched around his feet, finding something that he would've never expected, not in a million years: a metallic plaque that camouflaged with the floor. It was the right size and weight to have been the same thing that had hit him four years ago, and the reason why he hadn't been able to give any proof is because it was *invisible*.

Anger gave way to confusion, and then finally to fear.

He lifted it and took it into the room, then quickly phoned his friends, urging them to cancel karaoke night and come over as soon as they could to, quote, "change their lives forever." For five agonizing minutes, he stared at the wall where he had left the piece of technology that had ruined the last four years of his life.

The first one to enter his room was Todoroki Touya, nicknamed Dabi, who knocked on the window before letting himself in. He was a black cayuga duck that had been Keigo's best since his first day at school, becoming practically inseparable in the span of a few hours.

Keigo had been sitting alone at recess when he noticed some of the kids screaming nearby. He approached and heard how they were making fun of Dabi's looks, since parts of his feathers had a charred ash colour, calling him Ugly Duckling over and over. Dabi had looked ready to start throwing punches, but Hawks grabbed his wing and ran away with him, introducing himself as they fled.

Before they could even greet each other, Bubaigawara Jin burst through his bedroom door, with Himiko Toga perched on his shoulder, both of them visibly excited to find out what was so important to get their karaoke night cancelled.

"Alright, Hawks! What you got for us?" Dabi threw himself on top of his bed, crossing his wings behind his head.

"I'm so excited! This better be important!" Jin, or Twice as his friends called him,

let himself fall onto the floor, his enormous pig weight making some of the lighter knick-knacks in the room tremble.

"What is it? What is it?" Toga exclaimed, bubbles popping in the water inside her diver helmet as she jumped on Twice's shoulder, waving a bright pink glow stick on her fin. Since they had been friends for so long with the white and red koi, they were all fluent in her bubble-based speech.

"Okay, don't freak out." He pulled the metal piece from the wall and showcased it with his hand, inviting them to look. His excitement faltered, however, when he didn't get the reaction he was expecting. "Well, maybe freak out a little?"

"So... you've called us to see your new mime act?" Dabi raised an eyebrow, his other friends displaying equally confused expressions.

Keigo realised then that he was showing them the invisible side, so of course they were looking at him like he had just lost all his marbles. He stuck his head behind it, and the slight delay as the reflectors picked up the change to show the image behind them got them all standing up and quickly snatching the piece to take a closer look.

"Okay, so..." Dabi started, turning it around, checking the buttons and wires across the grey surface. "This is what hit you four years ago? Have you told your dad yet?"

"Yes! And no, I haven't, it's... it's complicated." Dabi left Twice and Toga to look into the plaque, sliding up next to Keigo and putting a wing around his shoulders.

"Birdie, this is the proof you needed when you were twelve, and you're gonna ignore it because you don't want to what, upset your dad?"

"I'm finally patching things up with him, and I care about him." Touya rolled his eyes at this. "I'm serious."

"I know you are, but this is a Big Thing, with capital letters. You gotta deal with this." Hawks shook him off and took a step back.

"He's right!" Twice chirped in, his eyes staring in fear at the plaque.

"But I don't want to ruin things again!" Keigo argued, crossing his wings.

"He's right!"

"Twice!" If looks could kill, Dabi would've murdered his friend on the spot.

"Sorry! I'm a flip-flopper!" He at least had the decency to look apologetic.

"Listen, there must be a way to explain– Toga, stop that," Dabi complained when she put the object in front of him so the reflective surface displayed his face. He swatted her away with his wing and looked his friend in the eye. "C'mon, Hawks, you two need closure."

"Things were already going back to normal, why can't they just stay that way?"

Keigo sighed. "Listen, are you guys gonna help me get rid of it or not?"

Toga chose that moment to press the button behind the panel, causing a bright light to blind them all for a second. Once they regained their sight, they saw the metallic piece floating idly. The fish jumped on top of it, sitting cross-finned and smiling brightly as it started to move around the room, her glow stick dangling from the edge.

"FLYING FISH! TAKE COVER!" Twice tried to throw himself under the bed in an attempt to dodge his friend, causing the whole room to tremble.

"TOGA, NO!" Keigo tried to grab the metal edge, but it was too late; she was already flying out of the window, her bubbly laughter echoing through the silent night.

They stared in terror as the piece clicked into the sky, engulfing their friend but for the bright pink light of the stick that had been dangling on her fin like a bracelet. After a second of panicked silence, the light started to move down the street and the group didn't say a word before they got moving. They all rushed downstairs, only to almost knock Yagi over while he was coming from the kitchen with popcorn.

"Wow, where's the fire, young men?" He smiled at them, clearly confused.

"Oh, heya, Mr. Yagi." Touya looked at his best friend. "Hawks, you got something to tell him?"

"Nothing to tell him, let's go! Bye, Dad!" He grabbed Dabi's wing and pulled him towards the door, closely followed by Twice.

They ran across the town following the light, and came into the baseball field just as a big cloud of dust settled; for a hot second it felt like their lungs stopped working, all their mouths agape, too surprised to make a sound as they took in the view.

A spaceship stood in the middle of the field. It looked like the most stereotypical saucepan alien aircraft one could imagine, standing at least six times taller than a two-story house, and twice as wide as it was tall.

Some weird robotic creatures were walking in the opposite direction of the field, so they used their chance to get on board and search for Toga. They got past the weirdest things, trying their best to ignore the unknown substances on display on the ship as they quietly crept through the corridors.

Keigo almost got separated from their group when he got distracted by a fluffy black creature with a tiny orange beak and black eyes, floating in a blue, pulsing light. It looked at Hawks with an intense stare, and because he didn't really know what to do, he winked at it before following after his friends.

Finally, they found Toga playing with an x-ray liquid mirror, but they also discovered something that they just couldn't ignore in the room next to it: a map of the solar system, with all planets crossed out except for Earth, marked instead with a

circle and some alien writing around it.

"What is this?" Dabi laughed nervously, his wing grabbing onto Keigo's shoulder. "Birdie, if this is an elaborate prank..."

"It's not, it's..." He looked at Touya. "I think they want to do something to Earth."

"WE NEED TO GET OUT OF HERE!" Jin screamed, grabbing Toga and scrambling out of the room.

"We need to alert the town." Hawks and Dabi shared a look, nodding as they chased after their friends.

With the safety of the entire world on the line, they rushed to escape from the ship. But luck had it that they came face to face with the robotic creatures in one of the corridors. Distracting them by knocking some of the containers around them, they ran as fast as they could until they were finally out, throwing themselves into the cornfield next to the bleachers.

They managed to sneak past the aliens as the robotic monsters cut through the plants searching for them, and made it to the town hall in one piece. Keigo flew towards the bell, ready to warn the town, but stopped himself for a moment, the memories of the last four years echoing in his head.

If he did this again, if they couldn't alert everyone before the aliens escaped, all his efforts to move on from the incident that had turned his life upside down would've been for nothing. There was no way to recover an ounce of respect, ever again, unless he managed a heroic feat, like saving the world or something.

Twice screamed, making Keigo look down: the robots were finally out of the cornfield, closing in on the town hall building at alarming speed, razors turning at the end of their weirdly long appendages. Because they had stayed on the ground when he took off flying, now they were trapped with no way out, except Dabi if he took off flying.

Hawks didn't have time for his fears to stop him: his friends needed him.

He closed his eyes and rang the bell, which seemed to bring the aliens to an abrupt stop. They looked... hurt by the sound, twitching in the spot with sparks falling from their heads. He kept at it as he saw the townsfolk coming out of their houses, and he begged the stars for them to make it in time to see the creatures.

But it seems the sky wasn't listening to him anymore: right before the mob of villagers arrived, the robots started to run back to the spacecraft, away from the town, so he took off flying and commanded everyone to follow him through the cornfield, his friends joining the race midway through.

Of course, by the time they made it back to the baseball field, it was too late; the spaceship had disappeared, camouflaged again thanks to its reflective panels. He landed in the middle of the empty field, then turned around as his friends surrounded him. They all tried to tell the crowd that it was no lie, that really, there were aliens, and no, it wasn't a continuation of the acorn incident.

Each of their friends' parents grabbed their kids and made them bow towards the crowd, ignoring the teens' insistent protests. Hawks' heart was thundering in his chest, eyes scanning the angry mob in front of him until they finally locked on his father's face, who was slowly approaching.

Once he reached his side, Yagi sighed. He looked tired, so very tired.

"Dad, please. You have to believe me." Keigo pleaded.

"I'm sorry, Keigo, but... I can't." He then proceeded to turn to the crowd, and bowed as he profusely apologised out loud for his son's behaviour.

Keigo's fists trembled, his eyes watering in frustration at the image of his dad having to ask for forgiveness on his behalf. Again. He bowed, if only so he could hide his face as a few tears escaped his eyes.

That night, he didn't get much sleep. After they got back home, his father went straight to his room without a word about what just happened. And by the time Keigo managed to pry himself out of bed to get a shower in the morning, he could hear Yagi downstairs, talking on the phone, his apologetic tone reaching him from the kitchen. He could guess it was the entire town calling to complain about the incident.

Once he was done getting ready for the day, instead of going downstairs, Hawks snuck out through his window and gently descended into the back garden, sitting on top of one of the few rocks that decorated the soft patch of grass.

It was there that Keigo's friends found him and sat in silence with him. Dabi shared a look with him, but he could only sigh. After a minute sharing each other's company, they heard a soft snuffle, so they all turned to look at Twice.

"It's not me!" he exclaimed. Keigo listened closely and located the next sound, behind one of the rocks.

Using his wings' impulse, he jumped to land by the boulder, only to be startled by the little black thing he had winked at back at the spaceship.

What the hell was it doing there? He couldn't help but yelp in surprise, as the rest of his friends started screaming.

Everyone was just lost in a discordant wailing of terror, until Toga gestured for them to calm down. She approached the little thing, bubbling away as the alien babbled to her in whatever language that was. She then turned to her friends, smiling.

"This little birdie's name is Tokoyami! His family left last night on the ship and he wants to find them." Keigo approached the little guy and took it in his wings.

"You can understand that?" Dabi laughed in disbelief.

"Hey, Tokoyami." Hawks smiled, ruffling the black puffy hair. "It's alright, we'll find a way to bring you—" A loud crack echoing across the entire town interrupted him.



The entire sky started to part ways, revealing at least a dozen spaceships that looked just like the one from the previous night, some of them four times the size of the one they saw before. Tokoyami jumped in excitement and perched himself on top of Hawk's head at the sight.

Soon the town was filled with screams and panic, everyone getting out of their houses and into their cars, trying to flee as smaller aircrafts started to descend from the fleet, pointing beams of light around.

Before anyone could say anything, the fuzzy little thing jumped down and ran to the front of the house, likely trying to get back to his parents. Hawk was the first one to react, taking off and stopping by the roof, trying to locate the small alien.

"Keigo!" He looked down to see his terrified father staring at the sky.

"This is what I tried to tell you all yesterday!" Keigo screamed, trying to be heard over the chaos as he descended to his side. "They're looking for their son!" He turned around, getting ready to take off after Tokoyami again, but something tugged at him.

"I don't know what you mean, but we have to leave! Now!" Yagi started to pull him towards the car, but he resisted.

"No, this is a rescue mission! They're trying to find this alien kid, and--"

"It's too dangerous, son!" his father interrupted, holding onto his wing for dear life.

"I'm the only one who can do this, Dad!" He yanked his wing away, unable to hide how hurt he felt. "I don't have time for this."

Ignoring his father's screams, Keigo took off soaring through the street. He knew he was being followed, but he didn't worry to be caught again. After all, if Keigo could be proud of something, it was how fast he could be.

He located Tokoyami in one of the main roads, just as an out-of-control car was making its way towards him. Hawk used his speed to tackle the alien into safety.

The problem was, sometimes he was too fast for his own good; his momentum threw both of them into the local theatre, the big screen softening the abrupt landing, but not by much. Ignoring his own pain, Keigo made sure that Tokoyami was okay, and they fist bumped in celebration, happy to learn handshakes were a universal thing.

"Keigo, please!" The doors slammed closed behind Yagi, who was clutching his side as he approached the screen.

"Dad, I--" Keigo saw the little alien running to hide behind one of the curtains. He turned his attention back to his father, noticing his laboured breathing. "Are you okay?"

"I-I am. I am. Now, c'mon." Yagi grabbed his wing, ready to leave, when the doors

opened once more.

"Hawks!" Dabi was quick to close the doors behind him, then looked at the scene in front of him. "C'mon, let's get out of here!" A few seconds went on where everyone looked at each other.

"Dad, I have to—" he started, trying to pry himself out of Yagi's grip.

"No, you don't have to do this, my boy." His dad looked afraid, more scared than Keigo had ever seen him.

An explosion outside made the whole building tremble. He tried to pull away again, but his dad just wouldn't let go. Yagi's wing held onto him with an iron grip as they each argued their own side of the conflict until Touya spoke again.

"Uh... guys, I don't know if you noticed, but it's the end of the fucking world as we know it!" He opened the door as if to showcase the madness of it all. "So I'd speed through whatever this is! Just deal with it!"

A heavy silence fell in the room.

It lasted a heartbeat.

"You're never there for me!" Hawks finally yanked away his arm, looking at the floor. "Yeah, you were there for the big game, and you're a hero in town, the number one, but you didn't want to listen to me when the sky fell. You took the side of the town and now you're not listening to me. Again."

"Not what I had in mind, but alright." Dabi muttered, looking away and eyeing the chaos from the door instead.

"You're always busy, and we can't even talk normally anymore because you're *ashamed* of me, instead of taking my side when I needed you." Keigo sighed, locking eyes with him. "And right now, I need you."

"Son, I..." Toshinori stammered, then sighed. "You're right, you're right." He chuckled to himself. "People think I'm a hero, and I couldn't even notice..." Another sigh. "I couldn't notice that my own son needed saving. That he needed me to tell him, like I did before, that it's alright now. Why?" He had a kind smile on his lips.

"Because you're here." Hawks finished in a whisper, recalling the first words his dad told him the day he saved him.

"Because I'm here." He put a wing on Keigo's shoulder. "And I will always be, son. I'm going to need a lot of work, and I'm sorry if I made you think my love was something you needed to earn."

"Dad, I..." Keigo tried to find the words, but instead he hugged his father, partially because he wanted to hide his tears, but mostly because he needed it.

"I love you, Keigo. No matter what." They held each other until a cough brought

them back to the present.

"And we're good!" Dabi, who was now standing by the front row, clapped twice, as if to signal the end of the scene. "Now, can we please get a move on? I would love not to die here if I can help it."

"Yes, yes." Hawks moved to the curtains, revealing the small fuzzy alien. "Dad, we gotta take Tokoyami to his parents." At this, he jumped to greet Yagi the same way he did with Hawks.

"Ah, young Tokoyami, of course!" He tried to be friendly and calm to the little thing, but Hawks had to suppress a laugh at the terrified look he shot his way.

"C'mon, dad. We got a planet to save." They stared at each other and nodded solemnly.

Yagi went down the stage, heading to the lobby while talking to the alien as he settled him atop of his head, like he was just another small kid he had to help. Which he was, in a way.

Hawks started to walk behind him, but he turned around, as if he had forgotten something. He went straight to Dabi, who was smiling at him. Once he got by his side, he moved fast as a shadow to make him trip, catching his best friend on his wings.

"For the record, I've always found you incredibly attractive." And with that, Hawks kissed him the way he had dreamt for years.

"Talk about closure." Dabi whispered after the kiss, making both of them break into laughter as they ran towards the door in pursuit of Yagi.

Their small party tried to make their way through the chaos, hiding behind flipped cars and debris from the destruction. But they were painfully slow in their approach, and Hawks was aware that time was of the essence, especially after witnessing Mirko disappearing after one of the rays was pointed at her for batting one of the robots that had now descended into the town.

The sound of a small bell snapped Keigo's attention to the road, and he laughed when he saw Twice driving the fire truck that was speeding their way. Dabi got out of their hiding spot to call for his attention, and soon the vehicle stopped right in front of them, the brakes screeching on the pavement.

They all were quick to climb on it, Keigo perched himself on the staircase.

"Drive us to the town hall!" he screamed to make his voice heard through the chaos.

Toga bubbled a laugh as they got a move on, soon getting an army of robotic aliens chasing after them as Jin expertly avoided all the dangers on the road. Dabi screamed instructions on the passenger seat, holding onto his seat for dear life.

When he saw the building in the distance, the path nothing but a straight line with no obstacles, Keigo felt he could almost breathe again. But then, a car was thrown

from behind them, and the pig had to maneuver dangerously to not crash right into it, sending Keigo, his father, and little Tokoyami straight through the open doors of the building that was their objective.

"Go, we'll make them chase us!" Dabi screamed at them, smiling before Twice started driving them away.

Not wasting a second, they scrambled to their feet and started running upstairs. His father had to slow down halfway through, his lung capacity reduced because of his injury, but he urged his son to keep going, that he'd catch up to him. Even though Keigo was hesitant to keep going alone, he perched the little alien on his head and nodded before taking off flying, finding it much faster than just running.

Soon, he reached the top floor, opening the emergency latch so he could fly to the top of the tower. But he hadn't taken into account the strong winds that were caused by the spacecrafts looming over the city, so he felt himself lose his balance, falling when he was so close—

A strong wing gripped at his shirt, and Keigo had half a mind to quickly grab Tokoyami as he was yanked back to the building. He turned around, smiling at Yagi, who smiled back as they both started to climb, the fuzzy black alien settled on Hawks' head, and when they finally reached the top, he secured his feet before holding Tokoyami towards the sky.

"Your son is safe! He's here!" he screamed, hoping these aliens could understand him. "You can have him back!"

A bright light, the same that had been pointed across the city to different objects and people, beamed at them, all the air left his lungs for a moment too long before he felt himself floating. As his lungs started cooperating again, Keigo dared to crack his eye open and a gasp escaped his lips at his surroundings.

They seemed to be trapped on a black void, suspended in the air, along with all the objects and people that had disappeared from the town. Mirko looked at him from the distance, a terrified look that didn't really belong to her face. Either they were dead, or the aliens were just transporting everything the rays touched into a storage room of sorts.

"Keigo! Are you okay?" His father called out, floating towards him until he grabbed his wing, pulling him close.

"Yeah, dad, so is Tokoyami." As if on cue, the bird-like alien twirled towards them, clearly not bothered by the lack of gravity.

It was then when three gigantic black eyes, one of them with a scar underneath, appeared in front of them, making them scream. The fuzzy thing that had caused all this pandemonium seemed excited, however.

"It wasn't very logical of you to kidnap one of my kids." The deep voice seemed to be coming from everywhere.

"We didn't kidnap him!" Keigo's reply came out before he could even wonder if it

was wise to argue with the alien that held them captive.

"Silence!" The eyes glowed red for a moment and the whole room lit up in a flare before returning to the endless darkness.

"My son was only trying to bring him back to you." Yagi positioned himself as a shield between the big display and Keigo. "If anything, it was pretty bad that you had left him behind. Believe me, I know a thing or two about that." He smiled sheepishly at his son, and he gave him a tentative smile back.

"Nonsense. This was a kidnapping, and the intergalactic law is clear, we shall execute—" He was interrupted by the apparition of another triad of eyes, these being a bright green.

"Shou?" This voice was louder, more high-pitched. "Did you find the little listener?" Hawks shared a look of confusion.

"I was about to—" The reply died when the new voice spoke again.

"Oh, there he is!" Suddenly, gravity seemed to work again, at least for Tokoyami, who was gently put down to the ground.

The green eyes went away, a small rectangle of light appearing not far from them almost immediately: a door. The brightness coming from it made it impossible to see what was in the other room. Tokoyami ran towards it, closing behind him straight away, bringing darkness back once more.

A few seconds of silence overlapped, the three black eyes staring at them intensely. Then the other eyes appeared once again, this time a smaller set of red, familiar eyes joining the projection, and he listened in to the soft sounds of the alien speech he had heard before.

"See? It was just all a big misunderstanding! Put the listeners down!" The green eyes stared at the black ones.

They heard a soft grumble as everything and everyone in the room was laid down gently, all eyes disappearing from the black void. A few confusing seconds went by, and then the door was opening again, revealing Tokoyami and two of the terrifying robotic aliens as they approached them.

Once they were in front of them, the heads opened up with a metallic screech, and Hawks almost started laughing when two fuzzy aliens, only slightly bigger than his new intergalactic friend, appeared from in between the smoke that was coming from the robots.

"I'm so sorry, listeners! My husband can get a bit overprotective!" One of them chirped, recognising the green eyes that had been so enormous before, the bright yellow fuzz overgrown into a crescent shape on the top.

"Hizashi, our son was *missing*." The other alien, with pitch black hair and a white scarf wrapped around what they could only assume was his neck, looked annoyed at his partner.



"He was just having a little adventure, that's all!" His voice was cheery as he jumped from the robot onto the ground, hugging Tokoyami with his little paws and twirling around, the kid's face neutral as he endured the embrace.

After that, the already surreal situation just didn't seem to come to an end, with the two aliens bickering as they asked everyone to come with them, calling over to the other spaceships to cancel the rescue mission.

They turned out to be pretty nice, once everything was cleared up. With the same technology that was used to cause so much chaos and destruction, they put the town back together, making sure everything was back in place as the locals and the aliens talked to each other like they weren't trying to tear the place down piece by piece earlier that day.

Once everything was set back into place, with the exception of Mirko, who now looked mellowed down, a pink dress in place as her and Twice were dancing and singing a love song, Aizawa, the black alien that had talked to them in the void, explained that the reason they had marked down the planet on a map was because they were the only place with acorns in that part of the galaxy, so they stopped by every year to get some.

Finally, the town bid goodbye to their new friends from space, not before the same damned metallic piece that had started all this fell down once more. Hizashi, the yellow alien, got an earful from Aizawa about not fixing it and how it would probably fall on someone's head one day. Keigo laughed as he apologised and reminded everyone how to tune in to his intergalactic radio show on Friday night before they hopped onto their spacecraft.

As they all took off, disappearing from their sight thanks to the reflective panels, Dabi came by his side, holding onto his wing as they stared into the clear blue sky.

"Can't wait to see that movie now that they have to change the ending." He joked, making Keigo chuckle, his own grip tightening.

"Me neither." He smiled at his best friend—*boyfriend*?

"Everyone!" Yagi beamed, the entire town turning to look at him. "Three cheers for Hawks! The new hero of Musutafu!"

Keigo could've started crying when all the townspeople started chanting 'Hawks' over and over as they clapped and cheered for him. He laughed, leaving his best friend to go hug his father.

It seemed he had been right the night before: all it took for the town to move on from the Chicken Little incident, to finally forgive and forget, was just a little bit of saving the world from an alien apocalypse, that's all.

And now, Hawks could finally fly free.















VOLVATILE



# Hounded

*A Fox & the Hound AU by Markovia*

All around, the thunderous rage of water. It tips from the rocks above, pummeling the deep pool at the base of the fall to fill the gorge with sound, and tips from the swollen clouds drifting black and foreboding across the sky. It splatters beneath Shouto's boots as he runs across the downs, causing the white material to be quickly covered in mud and slime. There's another colour mixed in with the earthen pallet, a deep rust-like colour that he's learned to identify during his short time as a hero—blood. It looks to be oozing from a deep wound judging by the sheer quantity of it. There's spatters of it everywhere, growing larger the further he runs up the curve of another steep hill. Shouto looks ahead, panting, gaze focused on the swell of orange light radiating from the centre of the gorge. He knows full well who is bleeding and he knows who caused the wound.

The roar of his father is unmistakable. And there, in a higher pitch, echoes the manic laughter of the brother he thought long dead.

Shouto drags in a breath as he reaches the top of the hill, cold breath puffing from one side of his mouth, smoke oozing from the other. He stares ahead through the sheet of rain to the distant light, seeing a clash of blue and orange raging atop a craggy point near the peak of a waterfall. For a moment he remains in place, almost stunned to stillness, as he watches the fire rage on the rocks. There's so much noise, so much light despite the rain, he might consider the sight to be beautiful were Shouto not disturbed by the knowledge of what is happening. His breath catches in his throat when the blue light starts to dwindle. It pushes back, flickers, it tries to stay strong and Shouto finds himself half-wishing for it to explode, victorious.

Only moments later, the sad blue light snuffs out.

"No," Shouto whispers under his breath.

His eyes widen as he watches a lifeless lump slip over the edge of the waterfall. It tosses amongst the torrent, visible for a few seconds, then it disappears amongst the terrible surge, presumably falling to the small lake below. Shouto swallows the lump in his throat and takes off toward the basin of the fall, heart pounding so loudly that the blood rushing through ears rages louder than the water. He spares half a glance to the top of the cliff as he runs and finds no trace of his father's orange flames still lingering up there. Undoubtedly he'll be heading down to the pool as well, wanting to find some trace of what survived the fall. Shouto pants as he picks up speed, pushing himself along the slippery ground using both halves of his quirk. He has to get there first, he cannot let his father do any more harm.

The decision to help *Dabi*, the villain who has tormented his friends and class-

mates for years, did not come easily. Shouto is well aware that he should not even be entertaining the notion of mercy, not for this man, this murderer. But- but for his brother, well that's a different story. The moment the penny dropped, a kernel of doubt settled in Shouto's chest and began sprouting larger with each noted observation. The madness in his brother's eyes wasn't put there without cause. The hateful things he spouts at their father have to hold some meaning and there must be a reason for his murderous intent. The scars on Dabi's thin body could be left by nothing but fire, Shouto has many marks on his own body that look similar. Marks caused by his father pushing him too far in the training room, causing his quirk to burst out of control and scorch his torso. He can only imagine what sort of pressure would have caused the extent of the damage to Dabi's body.

It is these observations that lead Shouto to an unfortunate conclusion, one that strikes uncomfortably close to home. Todoroki Touya wasn't born evil and, had his childhood not been one of turmoil, things might have been different. He might've grown up to be a happy young man if only something in the past had not twisted his mind to its current state of fracture. They might have had an actual relationship as brothers if only the die hadn't been cast toward misfortune before they were even born. Shouto knows he cannot change the outcome of the fallen dice, but he can certainly stop his father rolling another fatal hand.

Shouto runs and runs, leaving a blazing trail of fire and ice in his wake. There won't be much of a window of opportunity, his father is nothing if not ruthlessly efficient in dealing with his targets. The environment slips on by faster and faster, until Shouto breaks through the small copse of trees and hits the clearing at the base of the waterfall. He gives himself a short moment to catch his breath and pat out the flames lingering on the side of his face, then begins jogging toward the gravelly shore where the water laps against the earth. The sky above blessedly begins to clear and sunlight filters through the clouds to illuminate the idyllic scenery around him. If only he had time to stop and enjoy it, Shouto might consider this a peaceful place, but the situation that has brought him here somewhat ruins its beauty.

His breath peppers from his lips in short bursts, heart racing in his chest as he searches the body of water for any signs of life. There are ripples spilling out from the waterfall so it is difficult to tell what could be a cause of nature or the desperate flail of a drowning man. Shouto grits his teeth as he looks from side to side and prepares to throw himself into the pool to find his brother, when something in the water catches his eye. A pathetically frail hand rises from the froth, followed by a sodden head of dark hair. It takes a while for his brother to drag himself out of the torrent but eventually Shouto can see him clearly—that familiar, unfamiliar face staring back at him from across the water. Dabi hacks up a good amount of water as he forces himself closer to the shore, weighed down by the heavy fabric of his tatty old coat. It looks like a struggle, he's raking in breath like he's choking, like he's not getting enough into his lungs. He blinks water from his blood-shot eyes and never moves his gaze from Shouto, as if that point in the distance is all that is keeping him going. The closer he draws, the louder his pained gasps grow, and each one pushes another guilty lance through Shouto's chest. Dabi has almost

reached the edge when his scrawny legs give out and he flops face-first into the water.

"Hey!" Shouto calls, panicking.

He takes off into the shallows, relieved to find that Dabi hasn't fallen into the depths where he would likely be swept back into the torrent of the fall. The water reaches his knees when he halts and stoops to grip his brother's shoulders and haul him up, gritting his teeth as his water-logged weight rests heavily on his side. Dabi seems to be half-conscious, he's laughing softly to himself as Shouto props him up on his shaky legs.

"Fuckin' golden boy, comin' f'me," he slurs, rocking his head onto his little brother's shoulder. Shouto sees a flash of his teeth before he turns and starts stumbling toward dry land. "Such a good boy, Sho'."

"Shut up, Touya," Shouto replies gruffly, looping Dabi's sopping wet arm over his shoulder. "Just shut up."

Dabi goes rigid at the mention of his former name but he keeps his mouth shut for the rest of the journey, save for a few wet coughs. When they finally reach the shore, Shouto eases him onto the ground and drops to his ass beside him, exhausted from the effort of dragging him out. As the brothers catch their breath, the rain clouds drift off into the distance and the sunlight starts to filter through the trees into the clearing. Dappled shadows and spots of light pattern their heaving bodies and warm their faces as they turn their heads to face one another. Dabi looks so small curled up on the stony earth, far thinner and shorter than Shouto was even at the age of fifteen. Touya was a frail child, from what little Shouto can remember of him. The scars on Dabi's face obscure what might have been an obvious resemblance between them—the rounded jaw, high cheekbones, the deep, dark circles beneath their eyes from so many sleepless nights. But while there are many differences, there are similarities too. The matching colour and the shape of their eyes are so similar that they couldn't be anything but family.

Family. Even after all this time.

Shouto pushes himself up onto his hands and knees and crawls over to where Dabi is sprawled out, frowning as he sees his chest shudder and his breath stutter in his throat. "You okay?"

For a moment, Dabi just stares at him, unblinking. There is an unspoken consideration occurring in his wide eyes, a thought that Shouto assumes is *'can I trust this man?'*

"I- I won't stop you from running Touya," Shouto murmurs, reaching over to settle a hand on his brother's shoulder. "I just- I just came to hel-"

The crunch of leaves from a few metres away averts their attention.

From out of the trees, the hulking figure of their father approaches. Flames frame his face, whipping ferociously around his head in a manner most terrifying as he

stares down at his oldest son. It's almost as if he barely notices that Shouto is there, so focused he is on the child turned villain that slipped through his fingers all those years ago. Todoroki Enji does not make mistakes, not twice. His boots crunch against fallen twigs and dead leaves and as he grows closer, he begins to ball a fistful of flames.

Shouto watches Dabi's face and sees terror in his eyes. That, more than anything, is something familiar.

He pushes himself up onto his knees and stamps one down on the other side of Dabi's skinny legs, raising his arms and spreading them wide to protect him from the fiery glare of their father. His brother tenses beneath him and stays still, aside from a slight tremble that makes his shoulders shake. Shouto continues staring up at Enji, silent and stoic, his jaw set and thrust upward. *'Do not show your enemy weakness. Never avert your eye,'* that was what he taught him.

"Come on Shouto. Get out of the way," Enji orders gruffly, wrinkling his nose.

The breeze seems to weaken and silence the rustling of the trees around them. Even the waterfall seems to dim in the wake of the standoff in the clearing. Shouto stares and Enji stares, still holding the flames in the palm of his hand. Everything seems silent, until a quiet gasp comes from the fallen brother beneath him. It's a pathetic whimper, that more suited to a child than a man who has murdered many without care. It seems that one cannot help such things when confronted with the monster that lurked in one's childhood nightmares. Nightmares for most, reality for the unfortunate Todoroki siblings.

"Dad," Shouto murmurs, quietly. "Don't."

Enji's brow furrows for a minute as he surveys his sons, then the creases on his forehead soften. He appears confused and the longer he tries to work out the choice of his youngest son, the weaker the flames in his hand become. Weaker, weaker, until they snuff out. Shouto's shoulders sag with relief and he brings himself up onto both feet to stand tall, still hovering by his brother just in case. Enji casts another look at the shivering body of his eldest son, perhaps with something more complicated than simply anger behind his eyes. He releases a breath and jerks his head at Shouto before turning around.

"Come on, boy," Enji mutters, heading toward the copse. "It's time to go home."

As he retreats to the trees, Shouto spares a moment to look down at Dabi. He finds him staring back with a curious expression on his face, one partially of distrust, but also of confusion. And perhaps, just a touch of gratitude.

Shouto was never any good at finding the right words to say, so he departs with a simple wave and a promise.

"See you again."

Dabi doesn't reply but, when Shouto turns back to wave a final time, he is smiling.







# Prevail

A Tangled AU by Empress

Izuku and Katsuki had been living in peace for the last five years, a well-earned peace if Katsuki said so himself (which he did, often). They'd been welcomed into the kingdom despite both of their pasts, and had made a home for themselves among the bustling capital city.

But Katsuki couldn't help but wonder if the peace they'd been so deserving of was something they were starting to take for granted. He'd changed a lot over the last five years, but some of his old cynicism still remained when it came to certain types of people. He still had a hard time believing that their ordeal was done, that All for One was well and truly gone and Izuku was safe from harm.

Sometimes Katsuki wondered when the other shoe was going to drop.

"Katsuki!"

A familiar voice called out the young man's name, snapping him out of his ruminations. He opened crimson eyes to see the love of his life, Izuku Midoriya, bounding towards him with the endless energy that always seemed to consume the green haired man.

Katsuki sat up fully as Izuku skidded to a stop in front of him, nearly tripping over his own two feet in his haste to stop before crashing into the prone man. One thing that *hadn't* changed over the years was the klutziness that clung to Izuku. Despite the fact that he was supposed to be a dignified prince of the kingdom they resided in.

Izuku giggled as he caught sight of Katsuki's disapproving gaze, his optimism shining through the bright smile gracing his face in return. "Kacchan, what are you doing laying around here? We've got work to do!"

Katsuki grumbled to himself but hoisted himself from his spot on the broken-down hay cart he'd been sunning himself on. "What the fuck work do we have to do?"

"We've been tasked with going to the flower farm and picking out the flowers for the royal ball that's being thrown next month! Mother thought you were wasting away just following me around wherever I went, so she decided to give you something to do," Izuku teased, his smile so wide it surely had to hurt his face.

"What the fuck? I don't follow you around like some lost puppy!" Katsuki's indignant reply came as he followed Izuku out of the courtyard.

"I know you don't, but mother-" Izuku tried to placate his fiery boyfriend, but didn't get very far before being interrupted rather grumpily by Katsuki.

"Yeah, yeah, whatever. So, where is this farm we're going to and how long is this

supposed to take?" Katsuki's voice was more of a sigh of resignation than anything else, knowing that he couldn't really argue with what the *queen* thought of him anyways.

"It's not that far, Kacchan, just down the road and a little past the tavern. It'll be fun!" Izuku's ever optimistic tone prevailed once more, the little fucker probably knowing that Katsuki had conceded the argument just to get him to shut up.

They walked in silence for a while, both of them lost in their thoughts. Katsuki was aware of their surroundings, knowing that sometimes rough crowds from the tavern would take the same route they were taking to go to and from the kingdom. It wasn't that long ago that he used to be a part of that crowd, actually.

Izuku was lost in the beauty around him. The forest in the summer was lush, filled with greenery and flowers that flowed from the tops of the trees to down and over the road. He trailed his hand along long vines that wrapped around the trunks of trees, feeling the vitality thrumming through each one as though they were veins. He picked a long, white flower, its stem thick as he placed it behind his ear, the flower's petals tickling him.

Katsuki could tell that Izuku had tuned out his surroundings, something that constantly worried the blond-haired man about his younger, more carefree boyfriend. Izuku was aware that there was a bad side to the world, that not everything was flowers and sunshine. But Katsuki couldn't help but think that Izuku lost sight of that way too easily.

Katsuki was waiting for the other shoe to drop.

They continued on in silence, neither man speaking to the other. Izuku merely grinning and slipping his hand into Katsuki's whenever the other man came to walk closer to him, eyes darting around to check each likely spot an attacker would use to surprise them. Katsuki blushed as Izuku swung their hands widely but didn't comment on the closeness or Izuku's touch, just kept close to his boyfriend and was mindful of their surroundings.

Izuku watched as a bee landed on a pretty, pink flower. He hummed happily to himself as the bee traveled from flower to flower, pollinating and spreading the beauty of the great outdoors. He would never get tired of running his hands through grass, of picking flowers and placing them behind his ear. Not now, after everything he'd gone through to realize how amazing and special these things really are.

"Kacchan, smile!" Izuku's voice carried over the road to where Katsuki was examining the dense underbrush alongside the road they were currently walking down. His blond hair snapped around, Katsuki's distinctive red eyes locking with forest green ones as Izuku smiled widely at his boyfriend.

The most miraculous thing happened: Katsuki turned bright pink and managed a tiny smile upon his usually downturned lips. "Yeah, yeah, nerd."

Izuku couldn't contain his laughter, it bubbled out of him to fill the space between

them, bright and happy. He couldn't help but stare at his Kacchan as well, so out of place and yet perfectly in sync with nature around him. As he watched, Katsuki tripped over a jutting tree root and nearly face planted alongside the road. Red eyes glared at him as he laughed louder.

"Aww, c'mon, Kacchan! I was just playing! Are you okay?" Izuku managed to squeeze out between the peals of laughter.

"I'm fine, leave me alone, asshole," Katsuki replied but couldn't stop his own small smile from forming as he listened to Izuku's laughter carry on the wind. He walked towards the shorter man and offered his hand once more for Izuku to take. "Let's just get to the flower farm and get this shit done, I'm ready to be back home."



The flower farm was as lovely as Izuku had imagined it would be. Blooms of every color and shape grew there, little pink flowers with bright yellow middles and huge white flowers with long stems and even larger leaves. He tried to keep his eyes open the entire time to take everything in. Katsuki was more business focused, going over the color scheme for the royal ball they were supposed to be picking out the flowers for and talking to the workers to find out which blooms would be best for what they were needing them for.

It left Izuku plenty of time to wander around and sniff and sneeze, inhaling all the different scents left by each flower. Only when Katsuki called his name and said that they were done did he guiltily wander back over to his boyfriend and wind his arm around Katsuki's outstretched one.

"Sorry, Kacchan, I should've been helping you instead of looking around."

"Don't worry about it, nerd. It got handled, that's all that matters." Katsuki said as they made their way toward the front of the farm to start the journey home. Izuku smiled up at Katsuki with shining eyes. This was how Kacchan took care of him, his special care and kindness that he tried so hard to hide away from the world. He really was good for Izuku.

They continued their journey back home, the sun starting to set now. Katsuki urged Izuku to walk quicker, wanting to get back to the castle before night properly fell. They didn't linger over flowers or trees now, their pace hurried as they listened to the birds cease their chattering for the day and the lightning bugs started to glow in the road.

They had already past the tavern when Katsuki thought he heard the first noise. It wasn't much of a noise, just the sound of displaced air and maybe an unnatural shaking of a bush, but it caused his senses to be on high alert and his skin to crawl. He knew there was a chance he was being oversensitive, but he didn't want to risk Izuku's life to find out.

The ambush was sloppily put together, the group of four men that jumped out of the bushes at them lacking coordination and teamwork as they all tried to snatch at Izuku at once. Katsuki was immediately on alert, yanking his boyfriend behind

him protectively. The group spread out, circling around Izuku and Katsuki in an attempt to box them in once they realized that just grabbing Izuku wasn't going to work.

"Just give us the green haired pipsqueak and no one will get hurt," one of the burly men said to Katsuki.

"As if I'd fuckin' believe that for a hot second," Katsuki snarled in return. His head swiveled around as he tried to keep tabs on all four men and ensure that they didn't get their hands on Izuku. "What do you want with him?"

The men glanced at each other, clearly unsure of how much to say to the hot-tempered blond man standing between them and their goal. Katsuki growled when no answer was forthcoming. "I *said*, what the fuck do you want with him, assholes?!"

The man immediately in front of Katsuki moved, rushing forward with a fist up as he shouted, "That's none of your business!"

Katsuki moved in a blur, his own fist connecting to the man's face solidly a fraction of a second later. The man staggered backwards, blood dripping from his obviously broken nose as he struggled to keep his balance. The other three men stopped in their tracks, obviously not expecting Katsuki to be so ferocious.

One of the men, a thin, gangly man with gray hair and long arms, began to chuckle. "Well, now we know we're going after the right people, boys."

Katsuki eyed him. "What makes you so sure?"

"A blond-haired man with a temper that would as soon as fight ya as look at ya, all protective of a pretty green haired man? Yeah, we've definitely got the right people." The man slid his hands in his pockets, the picture of ease. "Take care of him, boys."

Katsuki's skin was crawling. He was hoping that this was just some sort of fluke, some misunderstanding that could be explained away. But the creep's words sealed it, these men were here for Izuku, knew of both him and Katsuki. Which means they were likely there for Izuku's healing powers.

*Fuck.*

The other two men rushed Katsuki at once, fists swinging wildly. Katsuki had a moment to be thankful for all the training he'd been doing with the soldiers of the castle, knowing that he wouldn't stand a chance against these guys if he hadn't been busting his ass to learn how to fight better to protect Izuku.

One man, someone who looked as though their skin had been repeatedly burned and scarred, lit a blue flame and aimed it at Katsuki. Ah, so they were magic users. Well, that would only make it more satisfying for Katsuki when he kicked all their asses.

The leader, the man with the gray hair, started to slowly close in on Izuku, a wicked smile playing on his lips as he zeroed in on the green haired man. Izuku, for all



that he didn't know how to fight or defend himself in any way, stared right back at the man as though he had no fear. Who knows, maybe with Katsuki being there and currently kicking ass, he didn't have any *reason* to fear.

"Why don't you just come with us and we can stop before your friend gets hurt," the man said as he approached Izuku. Izuku backed away, trying desperately to keep Katsuki in his sight as he avoided the man.

"Who are you? What do you want with me?" Izuku shouted, his words nearly lost in the din of fighting coming from Katsuki and the two men.

"The name is Shigaraki, and you know exactly why I want you to come with us, come now. I'm sure you remember our leader, the one you slaughtered in cold blood?"

The man's words caused ice to form in Izuku's veins. So these people were associated in some way with All for One? They were in real danger then. Izuku chewed his lip, his mind reaching for any kind of plan that would allow them to escape unscathed and return back to the castle.

Katsuki blasted a round of his own firepower back at the blue flame wielder, overpowering his flame and causing the man to stumble backward. Katsuki took the opportunity as it presented itself, kicking the man solidly in the stomach and sending him to the ground with blood on his lips. He didn't get back up.

Katsuki turned and faced the last man. He felt a lot better now that it was just a straight one on one fight. He just had to beat this asshole and then Izuku would be safe once more.

The man hung back, studying Katsuki. Katsuki, forever impatient and ready to exchange blows, rushed the man and let loose a flurry of punches. The man played defense, blocking the punches as they rained down, expertly avoiding getting hurt from any of them. Katsuki huffed, a smirk firmly on his face as he stared down the remaining fighter right back.

"Are we going to do this, or are you just going to—" Katsuki started, his voice cocky. The man chose then to move, ducking in close and delivering a solid punch to Katsuki's chest, knocking the wind out of him. Katsuki struggled to get back to his feet, agony ripping through him as he shakily stood his ground once more. "What a cheap shot, asshole."

The man smiled. Suddenly he moved once more, faster than the other men had been, appearing right in Katsuki's face with a cocky smile of his own. "Everything's fair in a fight."

Katsuki grinned, his palms landing solidly on the man's shoulders and heating up as he prepared to blast the man. "Remember you said that, fuck face."

The blast shot the man backward, his body landing on top of the other man. Katsuki raised a hand to his chest, pain shooting from where the man's punch had connected. "Fuckin' prick."

Katsuki turned, eyeing the last man. He'd come close enough that Izuku was nearly back to back with Katsuki. Izuku, taking the moment of stillness to move behind Katsuki once more, placed his hands on Katsuki's back subtly and began to heal him.

The man, Shigaraki, watched with interest as Katsuki stood to his full height, the pain fading away as Izuku's magic coursed through his body. He wouldn't give up, not this time, not ever. Not after all the struggles they'd had to endure to get to where they were now. Not after he'd messed up and almost lost Izuku once before. Katsuki learned from his mistakes, and he wouldn't let this man take Izuku.

"Let's go, motherfucker." Katsuki snarled, his hands curled into fists that he raised. He was ready to end this. Just this last man to go.

"It seems you've defeated all my friends, I'll admit I didn't expect that." The man said calmly, as though they were discussing the weather instead of the fact that three of his goons had just had their asses handed to them by one man.

He didn't seem mad about the fact, more calculating than anything, Katsuki thought.

"And now it's your turn," Katsuki pointed at the man, curling his finger towards himself. "Bring it on."

"Sorry, I'm not really the fighting type. But I'll be back, so don't get too comfortable." Shigaraki shrugged. A portal opened next to him, blackness swirling in its depths as he stepped through it. "Until next time...."

"NO!" Katsuki raced forward, his hand outstretched to try and reach the man before he disappeared into the portal. The swirling blackness faded away, black mist raining down on Katsuki's hand as he just barely missed grabbing the man and pulling him back to where they were.

*"DAMMIT!"*

Izuku came forward, his hand soothing on Katsuki's shoulder as they both stood in the darkness. "Kacchan, don't worry, we know who they are now. We can go back to the castle and-"

"NO. I don't want anyone to get away with hurting you again. They wanted you, nerd."

"I know that, but we don't have to do this alone anymore. We can tell the royal guard and let them handle it." Izuku smoothed his hand down Katsuki's arm, taking his hand and intertwining their fingers. "For now, let's get back home. I don't want to be out here anymore." Izuku's voice was quiet in the stillness.

"Y-yeah. Let's get you back home." Katsuki's voice was subdued, his fingers squeezing Izuku's after they laced together.

It seems like the other shoe was finally about to drop. Katsuki would make sure he was ready, and make sure no one would ever hurt Izuku again.













# Honor to Us All

A *Mulan* AU by ChocolatePudgePop

Even as a farm boy, Kirishima Eijirou struggles to get up before the rooster crows. He's not lazy, he's just not a morning person. Most days the rooster's call startles him out of bed, and one or both of his parents stand in the doorway of his room, amusedly watching their son untangle himself from the blankets.

Today is hardly different, and Eijirou's mother is practically dancing around the house by the time he drags himself out of his bedroom.

"Eijirou! Good morning. Late start for you I see. *Again.*" She smiles at her son, rinsing out the family teapot while she does so. "It's market day."

Eijirou groans, rubbing his eyes again. "I know mama..."

"And..." His mom starts with increasing enthusiasm. "It's matchmaking day!"

Eijirou groans louder, knees bending for added dramatic effect. "Mama *no!*"

"Mama *yes!*" She replies. "Eijirou, matchmaking day is a *beautiful* occasion!"

"That happens once a month." He grumbles.

His mother chooses to ignore him. "Any one of those lovely young women could be your *match!* You should be more excited!" She walks over to a woven basket hanging on the wall and brings it down, holding it out for Eijirou to take.

"Mama, that's *fine*. I don't hate matchmaking day. I hate that you send me to the *market* on matchmaking day! Every month!" Eijirou takes the basket anyway, because he knows he's not going to win this argument with this mother. He never does.

"What if today is the day you see your beautiful bride-to-be as she walks to the Matchmaker's home? It would be like fate that you already know the beauty of her eyes before she even appears at our doorstep!" His mother clasps her hands over her heart and sighs as if she's auditioning for a romantic theater performance.

"But the *crowds.*"

"Eijirou!" She huffs, hands on her hips. "Enough. You and I both know you never win this argument, so stop your belly aching and get going." She hands him a parchment with the items they need and a small bag of coins. "Greet your father before you go. He's doing his usual morning prayers."

She waves him off, and all Eijirou can do is sigh and prepare to leave for town.

Like clockwork, Eijirou's father is still kneeling at the family shrine a few meters from the main home. He's deep in thought, brows furrowed and hands pressed together in prayer.

Eijirou quietly approaches, kneeling beside his father and offering his own brief, but heartfelt prayer. He waits for his father to finish with a bowed head. Picking at the lint on his kimono.

"Market day?" His father asks with a gravelly voice.

"*And* matchmaking day." Eijirou sighs. His father laughs, patting Eijirou on the shoulder with condolence.

"She really wants this to be the day."

Eijirou shrugs. "I know." He really doesn't want to talk, or think about his match and marriage anymore.

"You should tell her." His father urges. Eijirou's heart skips a beat in panic.

"N-No... not yet." He pauses, trying to ease his anxiety. "Soon, maybe. But not right now." Eijirou rises, shaking the dust from his clothes and waving to his father. "I'll be back."

"Be safe, Eijirou!"



The town center is as crowded as Eijirou expected. Drove of people lining the streets, watching a parade of ornately dressed young women parade to the matchmaker. He can hear musical instruments, applause and shouts of praise. There might even be *singing* this time.

All he wants is to get to the market, which is on the opposite side of this enormous crowd. He manages to make some progress, squeezing past townsfolk without having to shout *excuse me* every five steps. But he ends up on the edge of the street, with a front row view of the women looking excited and nervous about their first-of-many special days.

*"Please look kindly on these cultured pearls. Each a perfect porcelain doll!"*

Wow, how did they manage to coordinate a song like that?

*"Please bring honor to us, please bring honor, please bring honor to us all!"*

Great. Now Eijirou is going to have that stuck in his head all day. But at least the women have arrived at the Matchmaker's home, and the crowd is beginning to disperse. He can buy what mama needs and hurry home before it gets too hot to finish the rest of his chores.



"Please bring honor to us—ugh! Not again!" Eijirou shakes his head, trying to dislodge the song from his brain. The sun is high in the sky, beating down mercilessly on his head. He thought he would have been home sooner, but the market was just as crowded. Eijirou had to wait fifteen minutes just for rice.

He hates market-matchmaking day.

Eijirou can see the cluster of homes that makes up his village just in the distance. Relief sweeps through him at the thought of being out of the sun and dropping this basket of food off his shoulder.

A sound like rumbling thunder is quickly approaching from the road behind Eijirou. He turns, seeing a dozen calvary heading his direction, the Imperial flag waving high above them.

He runs off the road, stopping to watch these soldiers ride into the village center. A group of his neighbors have already gathered, panicked and curious whispers echoing among them.

Eijirou runs as quickly as he can towards his home, dropping the market bag at a fencepost marking their land and joining his parents with the rest of the crowd. A tired looking man descends from his horse. His hair pulled back in a low, messy ponytail despite his high-ranking military clothing. He carries a scroll in his hand, but doesn't bother to open it as his eyes sweep over the hushed crowd.

"Our great nation has been invaded and is under attack by a naval force from the west!" He declares. "By order of our Heavenly Sovereign, the Emperor, and under the command of the Samurai, one *woman* from every family is being called to protect our land!"

Gasps erupt from the crowd, and Eijirou feels his mother reach for his hand and squeeze. He watches as his neighbors, some daughters and some wives, approach the messenger and take a scroll containing full details of their call to battle. Some women keep their heads held high, proud of the task they're about to take on. Others have already started crying in silence, trembling as they return to the comforting arms of their family.

"Mama," Eijirou whispers, eyes never leaving the men in front of them. "Do you have to go and fight?"

"No Eijirou. The great Emperor is kind enough to make exceptions for women who are too old, like me, newly married or pregnant."

Eijirou can't help but sigh in relief, squeezing his mother's hand again. But something inside him stirs, a desire to protect his family and country when his mother cannot.

"Can I go instead?"

Eijirou's father places a hand on his shoulder, shaking his head. "Men are expected to protect the family from the home. If our enemy were to make their way further inland, we would be required to protect our village and those nearby."

"But mama can't go. I could take her place for a family that has no daughters."

"Eijirou, hush." His mother chides. "The rules are in place for a reason. None of us have to go to the battlefield and we can prepare to protect our home and neighbors together." She wrings her hands together around the fabric of her kimono. "Heaven forbid it should come to that. But the discussion is over."

Eijirou opens his mouth, only to shut it with an audible 'click' a second later. He wants to argue further. Wants to demand the royal messenger that he be handed a scroll for a call to action. It's his duty as a *man*.

But his parents lead him inside the house, one of their hands on each of his shoulders, until all he can do is turn his head to watch the neighbors in their various states of emotion.



At dinner that night, Eijirou is still fuming, though his parents continue to eat in comfortable silence. He tries to let it go, but each bite of his meal feels like he's only adding more anger and more desperation to his emotional fire.

"Just let me join!" He shouts, slamming his hands down on the table and rattling the earthenware.

"Eijirou!" His mother gasps.

"We are the only household without a daughter! I could do so much more than sit here and *wait*!"

His father straightens his posture, looking intimidating even while seated. "You should consider yourself thankful you are not on the front lines! I wouldn't wish the horrors those women have seen on *anyone*!"

Eijirou's arms sweep outward in a dramatic gesture. "So I'm supposed to be happy doing *nothing*? Sit back and let our neighbors die?!"

"It is still a great honor to be called into battle!"

Eijirou jumps to his feet, almost knocking the table over. "So why can't I -"

"Your place is *here*, Eijirou!" His father rises too, voice booming through the house like thunder. "It's time to accept that!"

Eijirou's lip trembles, though he's not sure if it's out of anger or sadness. His fists are balled at his sides, dull nails digging painful into his palms. He storms off, rushing out of the house through one of the side doors that leads to the garden.

He can't *believe* his parents! How can they be... what even *is* that? Selfish? Dumb? Unreasonable. At the very least he knows his parents are being extremely unreasonable!

Eijirou drops to his knees in the thick grass near the pond, blankly staring at the shadowy outline of the koi swimming in the moonlight. He's glad he can't see his own reflection, angry for being someone who couldn't stand up for himself and do the right thing.

What would the 'right thing' be in this scenario?

Eijirou scoffs, pushing a thought out of his mind the second it enters.

"Pretend to be a woman." He laughs, swirling his finger in the cool water of the pond.

When the ripples still, his silhouette is the only thing he can see in the moonlit water.

His hair... is kind of long. He's always kept it tied back so it stays out of his face. He reaches a hand up to run across his jaw. Even in his early twenties, he has very little facial hair and only needs to shave every few weeks.

Nearly stumbling on the stone path, Eijirou rushes back towards the house. Sprinting across the yard until he reaches the storage room. He reaches into the darkness for flint stones, lighting an oil lantern hanging near the door to illuminate the room. It's mostly extra bags of animal feed and dusty furniture passed down through the family line. But what he's really looking for is straight ahead, in a lacquered chest with gold detailing.

The chest creaks open, and to Eijirou's great relief, everything is still intact. His grandparent's military uniforms, from the days when men *and* women would fight together on the frontlines of war.

He sets the lantern down, hefting his grandmother's chest plate out first to examine it. Eijirou is by no means a massive man, though he has been trying to bulk up more lately to prevent his parents from doing any heavy lifting. But his grandmother's armor is much bigger than he expected. Though he never met the woman, he's heard tales of her bravery and confidence, but no one ever mentions her *size*. If she was anywhere near Eijirou's build, she was certainly a strong and powerful woman.

Armor takes so long to put on, and Eijirou doesn't need his parents coming to look for him since he stormed off. So he quickly hefts the chest piece over his head and onto his shoulders, just to ensure it fits. He stands, taking a fighting stand and moves his arms and body in an imaginary fight. The armor is heavy, and it leaves him more winded than he would like to admit, but it fits, and that's what matters most to him right now.

He stores his grandmother's armor back into the storage chest, latching it shut to avoid future suspicion. That at least covers one part of his plan, but most impor-



tantly, he still needs a conscription notice, and he can't just go asking one of his neighbors.

Eijirou stands, taking his lantern as he leaves the storage room and heads back towards the main house. Tomorrow, he'll go back into town. There's going to be a lot of people rushing around, preparing to depart for training. Surely Eijirou will run into someone who doesn't want to go just as badly as he *wants* to go. Maybe he can come to an agreement with someone and take their place instead.

He slips inside the house without an issue, blowing out the light of his lantern and making his way through the darkness in silence. He can hear his parents talking through the doors of their bedroom, though can't make out their words. Really though, he doesn't want to know what they're talking about. They might still be angry at his outburst during dinner. It's just best if Eijirou goes to bed now and just waits to face them in the morning.



Despite Eijirou's restless sleep, he still wakes shortly after his parents. He hesitates at his bedroom door, listening to his mother move around the main room of the home. He needs to go into town again, but he doesn't want to risk his mother engaging him in tense or awkward conversation.

He waits a few more minutes, hoping his mother will leave the room just long enough for him to slip on his shoes and leave, but the perfect timing never arrives.

Eijirou sighs, smoothing out his clothes and padding through the main room as quickly as he can without actually running. He sees his mother pause her tasks out of the corner of his eye, but she doesn't make eye contact with him or make any motions to speak. He thinks it's better this way. He's not going to apologize for his opinions if she is just going to fight with him.

He glances towards the family shrine as he approaches the edge of their plot of land. His father's distant form bowed in deep prayer. Eijirou will have to pray later, hoping that the Gods and ancestors understand the urgency of his current priorities.

The market is just as crowded as it is on matchmaking day, with dozens of young women rushing between shops and stalls to prepare for their departure to the training grounds. Food supplies are nearly depleted for the day, but Eijirou can't risk bringing a second bundle of food back home. He can't really do anything without a conscription notice, that needs to remain his priority right now.

Eijirou casually pretends to browse the stalls, keeping an eye out for any woman who looks like she's having any serious misgivings about heading off to battle. He doesn't want to take advantage of anyone, but he figures it's a win-win if a poor woman gets to stay here with her loved ones and he gets to do more than sit around at home waiting for a battle that may never come.

"You must be excited!" An old man at a food stall grins at his customer, passing

her a small, tied off bag of rice. "Our women have always been powerful and successful in battle! You'll be the next generation of Japan's great soldiers!"

The young woman clutches the bag of rice close to her chest, giving the old man a smile that hardly reaches her eyes. From where Eijirou is standing she looks very sad.

"Oh, yes." She nods once. "It's such a great honor..." She widens her smile, though it continues to look strained. "Thank you very much." She gives the old man a shallow bow, shuffling farther into the market without another word.

Eijirou manages not to chase after the woman at full speed, catching up to her at a not-at-all-suspicious pace when she lingers between some market stalls to count her money.

"E-excuse me," He starts, trying to keep the nervous waver out of his voice. "You... have a conscription notice right?"

The woman bites her lip, leaning back as though to get further away from Eijirou without moving her feet. "Yes, of course I do. It's required by law for -"

"I know." Eijirou interrupts. "I just...uh..." He scratches the back of his hair briefly and huffs out a sigh, forcing himself to muster some confidence. "Listen, I'm the only son in my family. We don't have daughters or women of age to fight in this battle, and I don't think it's fair that I can't go in place of my non-existent sisters." It comes out in a rush, but the woman hasn't run away from him yet, so he pushes on.

"I-I don't know what your situation is, but I saw you at the rice stall and you just looked... so *sad*. Like you really don't want to go to war, even if it's seen as a great honor for all women who have or are given the opportunity." Eijirou's hands have been moving rapidly to his words, and in his pause he forces his arms to still, bringing clenched fists to his chest in a pleading posture. "I would like to go battle in your place. *Please*."

The young woman stares at him. Bright brown eyes wide with surprise and skepticism.

"You...*want* to put your life on the line like that?"

"Yes!" Eijirou shouts, causing her to jump. "Sorry. I mean—yes. N-not that I have a death wish or anything. But protecting my family on the front lines is the *manly* thing to do! What kind of man would I be if I sat around at home waiting for the enemy to come *here*?"

She stares at him a little longer, crimson and brown gazes searching one another in silence.

"You know that the punishment for a man cross dressing is -"

"I- I know." Eijirou hands wave in a vague dismissive gesture. "I'm willing to take that risk."

Eventually her hands move to the satchel at her waist, and she removes a scroll held together with a red ribbon, holding it out toward Eijirou.

"I think you're a little insane if I'm going to be honest. But...my family would rather I not go anyway. My engagement is just out of the time range that allows an exemption for reporting to the battlefield."

Eijirou takes the scroll, holding it delicately in both hands as though it was fine pottery.

"I don't know what your disguise plan is..." She comments, eyes flickering over Eijirou's body from head to toe. "But I hope you don't get to the training camp only to be discovered. I wouldn't want your efforts to go to waste." Her eyes flicker down his body a little lower than may be decent between strangers. "Or for you to lose something important."

Eijirou nods in agreement, still dazed over the fact that his half-baked plan is actually working in his favor. "I hope not either but... I think I'll be alright." He smiles at her, sharp-toothed grin stretching ear to ear. "You have no idea what this means to me."

"I think you're crazy," She laughs lightly, "but I see the passion in your eyes. Who am I to stop you? And, I do get some benefit out of this as well." She looks down at the supplies resting by her feet. "I suppose I spent all that money for nothing."

Eijirou is quick to pull out a handful of coins from the bag at his waist. "Here! Tell me if this is enough to cover what you paid, I'll take your supplies if you'll let me. It saves me from having to buy items before I leave and hide them from my parents."

She takes the money from him, counting it briefly then nodding and depositing them into her bag. "You can come pick this up from my place tomorrow. My home is a farm on the outskirts of the prefecture, heading in the direction of the battle grounds. If you come early enough, they will be waiting for you on the side of the house. Just...promise you'll be silent. I don't want someone mistaking you for a thief."

Eijirou nods, storing the conscription scroll in the sleeve of his Kimono. "I owe you my life. What's your name? I didn't get to ask. I'm uh... Kirishima Eijirou."

"I'm Fushikoma Haru."

"I owe you my life, Fushikoma."

"No, Kirishima, I most certainly owe you mine."



Eijirou is on cloud nine once Fushikoma departs back to her home. He truly hadn't expected to get this far in his plan, but now that he has he needs to seriously consider how he is going to pull off a female disguise. He only knows of one shop that

crafts items for those in the fine arts. It's likely the only place that will have something to suit his needs. Thankfully, it is not far from his current location, so he forces himself to sprint the entire way there, not wanting to waste any more time.

There's a middle-aged woman shuffling around the entrance of the shop once Eijirou arrives. Flushed and winded, he leans against the frame of the doorway to catch his breath with deep, heaving gasps.

"You know I don't close the shop until sunset." The older woman chuckles.

"I- I uh..." Eijirou stands upright, still panting though his body is calming down again. "I just wanted to get here as quickly as possible."

"I see." She looks him up and down, smiling. "And what can I do for a fine young man like you?"

Eijirou bites his lip, unsure how to really phrase his question for what he is looking for. But he tries, nonetheless.

"I want to um..." He pulls at a lock of hair framing his temple, "change my hair?"

The woman stares at him for a second, then turns halfway into her shop and sweeps her arm in a gesture over the small room. "Well, my wigs are typically for those -"

"In the performing arts," Eijirou nods. "I know. But isn't there anything *else*?"

The woman taps her finger on her chin, contemplating. "Well... I do have a new item from overseas." She shuffles over to a low shelf, lifting a small glazed jar in her hands.

"What is it?" Eijirou steps into the shop, following his curiosity.

"The foreigner called it 'hair paint'. Apparently it is very popular among westerners. This one is said to give your hair the color of red autumn leaves."

Eijirou takes the jar from her, lifting its lid to look peer inside and immediately slamming it shut.

"Oh gods!!" His nose scrunches in disgust. "That smells like *death*!"

The woman nods, amusement in her eyes and a laugh bubbling in her throat.

"It sure does! Don't ask me what the ingredients are, the foreigner *did* have the loveliest colored hair." She twirls her own greying strands around her index finger. "Must be worth losing your sense of smell for a few days."

"Ugh." Eijirou groans again, ready to decline the product, but remembers how badly he needs something like this. "How much?"

"Oh?" The woman's eyebrows tick upwards. "Hmm... for a handsome boy like you? Three gold pieces."

About as much as Eijirou hoped to spend. He is desperate after all, so he hands over the payment as requested.

"Now," the woman nods, storing the coin away, "the man said to put it in your hair in thick layers of the paste, and leave it overnight. But it will stain your bedding so lay on something you don't mind throwing away and then wash it out in the morning."

"That's it?"

"That's it." The woman nods. "Try not to leave it in too long. Apparently the color can be *very* strong, but long lasting."

Eijirou holds the jar with both hands, one palm pressed down on the lid to prevent any spills of product or foul smell. He bows to the woman, expressing his gratitude and wishes her a pleasant day.

He finally has everything he needs. Eijirou almost can't believe he made it this far in his half-baked plan. He's going to *war*. He's going to be a man and protect his family the same way other brave women have in the face of danger. Eijirou can feel it deep down inside that he's doing the right thing. Even if his parents don't agree.

He manages to return home without incident, and neither of his parents are outside with the animals or on the small plot of vegetation. Eijirou assumes he's going to be able to make it to his room without being stopped as well, until he nearly drops the hair paint in the genkan when his father calls his name.

"Eijirou, there you are!" His father sounds relieved. "Where have you been all day?"

"Uh..." Eijirou walks toward the table they are kneeling at, "out."

Two sets of eyes stare at him with obvious skepticism.

"What's that you have there?" His mother gestures towards the jar in his hands.

"Ink?" Eijirou winces that when it sounds like a question.

His parents just stare again.

"Um, Eijirou," His father shakes his head, deciding to move forward in the conversation. "Your mother and I just want to commend you for your understanding about the war efforts."

Eijirou's anxious expression twists into confusion. "What do you mean?"

"Well," his mother adds, "we were worried you would continue fussing about not being able to go fight with the women. But we are so proud to see you accepting your duty to protect the home. As it should be."



Eijirou can feel himself scowling. His lips press into a thin line as his grip tightens around the jar of hair paint. "Yeah. Sure. I need to go." He hurries to his room, swiftly closing the door behind him without slamming it, and ignoring his parent's calls for him to wait.

They still don't understand him.

It doesn't matter now though. By morning he'll be long gone, whether that makes his parents proud or not.



Eijirou's hair is still caked with hair paint when he sneaks out of the house in the dead of night. He doesn't even risk carrying a lantern, blindly finding his way towards the stable where his favorite horse rests. He narrowly avoids getting kicked in the chest, shushing Tetsutetsu when the animal rears back in fear.

"Hey! It's me!" Eijirou whisper-yells, glancing towards the house to make sure his parents weren't alerted. "Tetsu shhhh it's just me!"

The horse stares at him a moment longer, its backside bumping into the wall of the stable in fear. Eijirou smiles, arms extended in a patient, calming gesture. Tetsu starts to approach him slowly, sniffing at Eijirou's clothing before pushing his long snout against the young man's cheek.

"See?" Eijirou chuckles, "told you it was me." Tetsu waits patiently while Eijirou attaches the harness and saddle and secures the bags of travel supplies. "We're going on a little trip buddy." Eijirou pulls himself up, seating himself on Tetsu's sturdy back. "Let's go."

Eijirou guides his horse as quietly as possible out of the stable, not bothering to take the time to close the gates behind him. He glances at his home as they near the edge of the land, feeling a sharp tug of guilt and hesitation rush through him. But it isn't strong enough to make him change his plans. He's going through with this no matter what it takes, even if he's discovered the moment he gets to the training camp, at least Eijirou can say that he tried.

Once he and Tetsu are at the edge of their small village, he snaps the reins until Tetsu takes off in a full run. His parents will probably figure out he's gone in the morning, but by then, Eijirou will be too far away for anyone to drag him back home.



Training camp sits in a wide field shrouded by thick forests rising high on endless hills. The bustle of soldiers-to-be can be viewed even from a distance, tents in various stages of pitch and lines of women checking in with their conscription notices. There are several plumes of campfire smoke rising into the sky and the faint, unintelligible chatter of voices as returning soldiers reunite with one another.

Eijirou should be down there by now, mingling and trying to blend in before training officially begins. Instead, he's hiding in a small clearing in the forest where the cliff overlooks the camp below. Currently, he has his head submerged in a flowing creek, angrily scrubbing at his hair to wash out as much of the hair paint as humanly possible. The old woman at the shop didn't say anything about the paint burning if you left in it too long.

He blindly reaches for the bath cloth folded beside him, squinting past the water in his eyes to watch the red color wash away. He dries his hair as best as possible, satisfied with the minimal color that stains the fabric. He doesn't have anything to make sure it looks decent, but braided or underneath a helmet it might not matter much anyways.

Eijirou walks towards the edge of the clearing, peeking through the trees and overgrown foliage and at the camp below. He's been nothing but nervous his entire journey here. But in the early hours he has wasted hiding away on these hills he figured out how to wrap a bandage around his chest and stuff it with scraps of fabric to simulate breasts. And similarly figured out how to wrap his hips and crotch in order to hide his not-so-womanly parts. But even in combination with a new hair color, he's not sure he can pull off being feminine without being discovered and severely punished.

"Feminine... feminine..." Eijirou paces around the clearing and turns to Tetsu, clearing his voice. "How is this for a falsetto?" He asks his horse, forcing his voice an octave higher. It sounds terrible, even in his own ears, and Tetsu huffs and turns away from him in favor of a new patch of grass to eat.

"Okay... I'll keep working on that." Eijirou paces again. "H-Hi," he continues in the falsetto, "is this where I sign in?" His hands clap together and he widens his eyes in an attempted expression of awe. "Oh wow, I love your s-sword and your hair!"

Tetsu huffs louder this time and shakes his head as though disagreeing with everything Eijirou is doing.

"Well you're not exactly helpful!" Eijirou grumbles. "Oh my god... It'll be a miracle if anyone actually believes I'm a woman joining the army..."

"A MIRACLE?!" A shock of lightning flashes down a few feet from where Eijirou stands and a shadowy creature rises from the rocks and grass. Smoke billows from the fire now burning in the grass. It's tall, with wiry arms and an unnaturally long tail. Horns stand sharp upon its head as it stares Eijirou down.

"GIMME A WAR CRY!"

"AHHHHH!!!" Eijirou scrambles backwards toward Tetsu.

"HELL YEAH!" The creature cheers.

"It's a freaking forest spirit Tetsu!"

"Prepare yourself Kirishima Eijirou! I have been sent by your Gods and Ancestors to guide you through your masquerade!" Another line of lightning strikes the ground, and Eijirou wonders in fear if he's going to die by this spirit or by the fire it's causing.

"So listen well, if the army finds out you're a *man*?! The penalty is *castration*!"

"W-who are you?!" Eijirou manages to ask, still hiding behind his horse.

"Who am *I*?!" The spirit scoffs, offended. "I am your *guardian*, Kirishima Eijirou! I am the powerful, the *charming*, the indestructible -" the shadow begins to move away from the rocks, and Eijirou can't help but anticipate the awesome mortal form this spirit has surely taken, "-Denki!"

A small, blonde-fur mouse scurries out from the rocks, bowing with a whip of its tail. Before Eijirou can even react, Tetsu is attempting to trample the poor creature to death. The squeaks of a terrified '*Denki*' bleeding through the hard stomps of Tetsu's hooved stomps.

Eijirou pulls his horse away, kneeling down to poke at the now-dirty, bruised creature on the ground.

"My...ancestors sent ... a *rat*?"

"Hey!" Denki pops up, "I'm a *mouse*! Do I look ragged and dirty like a rat?!"

Eijirou wonders if he's been hit on the head. "But you're uh..."

"Badass? Inspirational?"

"Cute?"

"Of course! If I was big and monstrous you would have run away on your horse by now!" Denki scurries up the fabric of Eijirou's clothing and onto his shoulders. "I have abilities you couldn't even *begin* to imagine! Like umm... I can turn invisible and spy on some hot babe—AH!"

Eijirou pulls Denki off his shoulder and drops him to the ground. "That's not very manly of you."

Denki shakes the dirt off his fur with his tiny paws. "Hey, if you don't want my help that's fine! Go make a fool of yourself with your bad falsetto and puffed-out-chest stance. But remember, without me you could lose so much more than just a battle." Despite his position on the ground at Eijirou's feet, Denki makes a very pointed expression towards his hips.

"Okay, okay!" Eijirou concedes. "You're right. I do need a lot of help..."

Denki is back on his shoulders in the blink of an eye. "Alright! Let the Badass Training begin!"



Denki hides beneath the collar of Eijirou's clothing and is shielded by the curtain of hair falling over his shoulder as they stand at the entrance of the camp. Eijirou feels like he's about to puke.

"Okay, deep breath. Time for that sultry hip sway." Denki whispers in his ear. "One foot directly in front of the other, shy smile and work that ass."

Eijirou leads Tetsu by the reins through the camp, trying not to make full eye contact with any of the women he passes by. Most of them are just talking amongst themselves, side eyeing him without breaking their conversation. Others are working out, sparring with swords or hand to hand combat. Eijirou feels even more out of place knowing his skill set is nowhere near some of these seasoned warriors.

"They're amazing..." he whispers in awe.

"And drop dead gorgeous." Denki sighs. "I hope you're paying attention so you know how to blend in!"

More of the women are staring at him, and Eijirou realizes the audible conversation is being replaced by hushed whispers and the looming feeling of judgement.

"I don't think I can do this..." Eijirou hunches his shoulders in an attempt to make himself smaller.

"Summon your inner cuteness! Go say hello to someone!"

Eijirou tries to clear his throat without drawing more attention to himself, approaching a young woman who is digging through her bag. "Uh... H-hell—OH!"

She stands suddenly, bumping into Eijirou hard enough to send him stumbling backwards into another unsuspecting person.

"Hey!" Pottery clatters to the ground. "My lunch!"

Eijirou whips around, hands raised in an apologetic gesture and trying to remember to maintain his falsetto. "Oh, I-I'm so -"

"Don't you watch where you're going?!" The angry woman screams, snatching a bowl of food away from another nearby woman and hurling it in Eijirou's direction.

He manages to duck, but the bowl hits someone else in the face hard enough to knock them unconscious. Eijirou isn't sure if he should try to help or run for his life.

"FOOD FIGHT!" Someone yells, and suddenly bowls and chunks of food are being tossed in every direction. Women screeching at each other, pulling hair and punches at full force.

It's complete chaos and Eijirou is already certain he has food in his hair. He tries to pull two women off each other while simultaneously trying to keep Tetsu from freaking out and running away.

An explosion goes off, and the screams that sound throughout the camp frighten everyone into stillness and silence.

"What the *fuck* is going on here?!" A gruff voice shouts. Eijirou looks over to the source and spots a blond, somewhere around his age, holding a torch with the remnants of a small explosive burning the grass at his feet.

"It was *HER*!" Someone blurts, and she *must* be pointing at Eijirou because suddenly everyone's eyes are on him again and the blond man is storming over with a look of murder in his eyes.

"You think you can just walk in and trash my camp?" The blond growls, leaning close to Eijirou's face.

"Uh," Eijirou bites his lip, switching to his falsetto. "I-I'm sorry, I didn't mean to -"

"What's your name?" The blond interrupts.

"I- I uh... I -"

Another blond man appears, this one looking smug and glaring down at Eijirou like he's the scum of the earth. "Your commanding officer asked you a *question*."

Eijirou stands to eye level with his captain who hasn't stopped scowling. "Y-yes my name... it's uh..."

"Just shorten yours to Jirou." Denki whispers from behind his neck.

"Jirou." Eijirou dumbly repeats, but realizes that a few bystanders are giggling, and judging a woman with short black hair and teardrop markings beneath her eyes.

"If you're trying to pin this on your fellow soldier your shit out of luck." The captain growls. "I *know* her name is Jirou, I asked for *yours*."

Denki scrubs at his whiskers. "Pika... pika..."

"Pikapika!" Eijirou repeats.

"*Excuse me?!"*

Denki snickers, "There's an old joke attached to that somehow. I just know..."

"Denki..." Eijirou growls.

"Denki?!" The captain shouts impatiently.

"No!"

"Then what is your *fucking* name?!"

"Rin! Just say Rin dude I can't think of anything else!"

"It's Rin!" Eijirou nearly shouts.

The captain's eyes narrow, burning into Eijirou's soul, which isn't hard with eyes the color of a blazing fire.



"Hand over your fucking papers."

Eijirou scrambles over to Tetsu, shoving his hand in a bag hanging off the side of his horse and revealing the conscription papers he got from Haru.

The captain snatches them away, pulling open the delicate material and skimming over the words. "Fushikoma?"

"T-that's me!"

The smug blond glances at the paperwork over the captain's shoulders. "Never heard of them." He scoffs.

"W-we're just some humble farmers... sir...?"

"Bakugou." The captain barks and hands back the papers. "Alright *ladies*," he turns, loudly addressing the women who have since picked themselves up from the ground and straightened out, despite the trash that now litters a section of the camp. "Since you were all so eager to welcome your friend *Rin*, you'll spend the rest of the evening making this camp immaculate again. I better not find a single fucking piece of food on the ground at dawn tomorrow."

There's a collective groan, and several menacing looks sent in Eijirou's direction.

Captain Bakugou turns and heads back towards his own, much larger tent, parting the sea of women as he does so. "Be ready to train hard tomorrow, this won't be your primp and groom matchmaking day."

Eijirou is purposely bumped into on his way to find an empty spot for his tent and supplies, and even when he begins helping with cleanup, many of the other women start dropping more trash in his immediate area so it takes longer for him to finish.

When he's finally done, the sun and long since set and his eyes are sore from straining beneath the low torch light. He collapses onto his bedroll, running his hands through his hair to loosen any remaining bits of food.

Denki is already curled up on the roll and raises his head lazily when Eijirou's head hits the pillow.

"We'll make you some friends tomorrow." He says through a yawn.

'Yeah... *Eijirou* thinks as he starts to lose his battle to sleep. '*Tomorrow.*'



Eijirou could use at least another eight hours of sleep when Denki wakes him by jumping on his forehead.

"Wakey wakey Eijirou! I know women need their beauty sleep but it's time for warrior training!"

"Hnmg..." Eijirou rolls over, knocking Denki to the floor and pulling his blanket higher over his head.

"I made you breakfast!" Denki pushes a chipped bowl full of a grey, gooey substance. "Gotta start your day right!"

It doesn't smell like much of anything, but it's *hot*, and Eijirou can't help but wonder how a mouse managed to put together a hot meal. He sits up anyway, rubbing the sleep from his eyes and staring down at the bowl. He *does* need to eat something...

A small, fuzzy black face pops out from within the bowl, and stares up at Eijirou with far more than 2 pairs of eyes.

"Uh...?"

"Sero! Get out of there! You're gonna make Eijirou sick!" Denki pulls an entire spider from the bowl, setting it down on the floor of the tent and pushing the bowl closer to Eijirou again.

"A... spider?" Eijirou mumbles, brain still blurry from sleep.

"Yeah! He's my new buddy Sero. I found him this morning." Denki crawls up to Eijirou's shoulder, whispering in his ear. "He thinks he's '*lucky*' but I don't have the heart to tell him the truth."

Eijirou can't even figure out how to respond to this bit of news.

"So first day! You gotta assert yourself as an Alpha female after yesterday's fiasco. But be nice! Unless of course if they punch you then you gotta punch back."

"I don't want to have another brawl with my fellow warriors..."

Tetsu's head bursts though the entrance of the tent, huffing and trotting in place as though he's anxious about something.

"Oh, are they lining up already?" Denki asks casually.

"WHAT?!" Eijirou scrambles out of bed, knocking over the sad breakfast and trying not to squish Sero while he dresses for the day. "Shit shit! Can't be late on my first day!" He scrambles to wrap his chest, haphazardly stuffing the material and hoping he doesn't look unnaturally lumpy.

"Ohh fake boobs!" Denki comments. "I should have thought of that!"

"Gotta go, stay out of trouble!" Eijirou rushes out of the tent, leaving his animal friends in the wake of his now-messy tent.

"Wait, do you need your armor or -?" But Eijirou has already run too far for Denki's voice to carry. "Be the manliest female warrior out there Eijirou."



"Pull yourselves together ladies! This is *army* training not a social gathering." The smug blond is already outside, appearing to be pestering the women who are waiting for the day to begin.

"Oh but Monoma," one woman pouts and cups her hands together, "I made sure to do my hair and *everything*."

Neito rolls his eyes as the other women snicker, but Eijirou just falls in line silently and tries not to draw attention to himself.

"Oh sweetie, did you have a late night?" Someone throws their arm over Eijirou's shoulders and pulls him close, until Eijirou is getting a face full of short, curly hair.

The woman with the triangular facial tattoos appears on the other side of him, smirking with her arms crossed. Eijirou quickly remembers that her name is Jirou. "I hope no one force fed you the food we had to clean up yesterday."

"Soldiers!!" Captain Bakugou marches towards them, and everyone snaps into a perfect, orderly formation. "Does swift and silent mean nothing to you?"

It's the first time Eijirou gets a good look at Bakugou without being terrified for his life. He's amazed to see someone so young be the leader of an entire army of women, but even more surprising that Bakugou is a *man*. Eijirou can't have been the only one who had been expecting a female Officer.

Despite the aggression rolling off Captain Bakugou's every muscle, Eijirou can't help but think how attractive he is. He already knows Bakugou's eyes are absolutely stunning. Put it all together with a body that has obviously undergone years of physical training and you have practically given Eijirou the man of his dreams.

Eijirou nearly drools the second Bakugou's shirt comes off, and he's obviously not alone in the brief, dirty thoughts that flicker through his mind as several hums and sighs sound off among the line of women.

"Ooh baby." The curly-haired woman comments beside him.

"Hardly my type." Jirou mutters on his other side.

Bakugou removes a bow and arrow from a collection of weapons arranged nearby and aims it at the top of two towering wooden pillars. He draws it perfectly with a single draw of air into his lungs and releases the arrow with an exhale. It imbeds itself in the wood with a thud and Eijirou isn't sure if he's supposed to applaud.

"So," Bakugou turns towards them again, a mischievous smirk on his lips. "Who would like to volunteer?"

The curly-haired woman practically *leaps* forward, standing straight with her chest puffed in a proud stance with a wide smile. Eijirou hadn't noticed before, but her hair has a sort of pink hue to it.

Bakugou scoffs, "Alright pinky, you're up."

"My family name is *Mina*, sir. Thank you!" She approaches the wooden pole, cran-

ing her neck to look straight up at her target arrow. "Um... should I just...?"

"Oh, *right*." Bakugou scoffs, and opens a large chest that had been placed among the weaponry. "I guess I should give you this." He hefts two large, brass disks by thick leather straps wrapped around each one. Eijirou can see the muscles in Bakugou's body working. From shoulder to wrist and the muscles flex in his torso. But the captain shows no signs of exerting great effort to carry such massive objects.

"You'll need *these* to retrieve the arrow." He holds the disks out for Mina, but as soon as she takes them they hit the ground with an uncomfortable sounding thud.

"What the hell!" Mina cries, struggling to lift even just one weight. The entire camp watches her attempt in pitying silence, before Bakugou takes back the disks and motions for her to get back in line.

"That was a great attempt." Eijirou whispers, trying to encourage her, but Mina continues to sulk.

Bakugou waves a hand towards the posts again, silently urging another volunteer to step forward with another well aimed smirk. One-by-one, women of all sizes and physical prowess attempt to climb towards the arrow, and one-by-one they all fail. When Eijirou lands on his back from the short fall, he isn't sure if Bakugou's disappointed frustration is more embarrassing than being outright laughed out.

When everyone has made at least one attempt, Bakugou stands before them once more, watching handfuls of women try to ease newly forming bruises and smother broken pride.

"A battle takes strength, agility, patience and *discipline*, ladies!" Bakugou shouts, staring down every person standing in wait. "Those arrows are the ultimate goal of this training camp, but defeating our enemy is the ultimate goal of war." He stops in front of Eijirou, raking his eyes over the redhead from top to bottom. "If you can't handle that, you better get the fuck out of my camp and go home right now."

No one dares make a move, and Eijirou struggles to maintain passive eye contact with the Captain until he turns away to glare at someone else.

"Alright then!" Bakugou's grin is wild and manic, like a wolf about to lunge for its kill. "Let's get down to business."



Working on a farm suddenly seems like a life of luxury compared to the training Bakugou puts them through. From day one, Eijirou is second guessing his abilities all over again. He's going to die from this training long before his true Identity is out at risk.

The first day of training was merely to "gauge your current abilities"—according to Captain Bakugou. He isn't really sure how striding across logs embedded in a rushing river is a measurement of personal ability. *Several* women nearly fell in on

different occasions. Eijirou was sure they would have been swept away if someone hadn't been there to pull them out of the water.

Everyone had dragged themselves back to their tents that evening, filthy, tired and on the brink of collapse only to be reminded by Bakugou that the "real" training would start the next day. Eijirou wondered if it was more treasonous to fake his gender or escape training all together.

Sword technique, hand to hand combat, archery, strength training and running around an endless mountain were among the daily training sessions they all endured. It took days for Eijirou to realize that he was in fact getting stronger alongside his fellow soldiers. Fewer bruises during combat practice and easier breathing when he ran up the mountain.

The pillar however, was the final challenge no one had managed to overcome. It was obvious that Captain Bakugou was most frustrated with this. What good was their training if they could not succeed in *all* things?

As hard as he worked, as much as he pushed himself and progressed in all his other training, he could *not* climb to the top of the pillar. He tried to put it off as long as possible, opting to improve his abilities in other things and hope that *next time* he'll finally reach the arrow.

But throughout the training days Bakugou would not stop *staring* at him! Every time Eijirou happened to turn his head, Bakugou's eyes were on him dead center. Eijirou wonders if the captain can see right through him. If his disguise and forced tone of voice never stood a chance against Bakugou's burning gaze. Should he fail more often or pretend to struggle more when trudging up the mountain with the pails of water on his shoulders? Would that add to the illusion of being a first-time-female-warrior, or would it just solidify the belief that Eijirou truly isn't *meant* to be here?

It was similarly not in his favor when Bakuogu nearly caught Denki helping him cheat during the archery exercises. It's a wonder Bakugou only glared at him a little harder and a little longer, but ultimately didn't raise suspicion over small, spiritual rodent-creatures.

Everything comes to a grinding halt for Eijirou after another evening of failing the arrow challenge. He had been exhausted since morning, and it was being reflected in his training. Eijirou fell in the river, was the last person to run down the mountain, and missed obvious cues from his opponent while sword fighting. So when he falls from the pillar for the final time that day, Captain Bakugou is already looming over him, conscription notice nearly crushing in his palm.

"You're done." Bakugou growls.

"Wha—?"

"Get your shit together and go home, *Rin*. You're not cut out for this and I'm not going to put my soldiers at risk in the middle of the war for someone who can't keep up."



He drops the scroll in Eijirou's lap and stomps off without another word. Women nearby avert their eyes and resume their training, though all excess chatter has gone silent amidst Eijirou's humiliation.

*'I'm just having an off day',* Eijirou wants to explain. *'I can't go home yet, I can do this!'* But Bakugou isn't giving him any more attention, likely assuming that Eijirou is collecting his pride before he leaves the camp for good.

Rage and shame erupt within Eijirou's soul, but he ultimately decides not to embarrass himself any further. He tried to be a good soldier and ultimately failed. He'll return home to his parents with his dignity broken but at least his life will be intact.

But his determination takes over instead, and Eijirou takes hold of the weighted plates once more with a firm grasp. He hugs the pillar, leather straps twisting and securing each other in a single motion. *This* is what he had to do all along. He rides the euphoric feeling to the top of the pillar, fueled by the fact that he had done the *impossible*.

Eijirou perches himself atop the pillar, waving down at the group of women who have taken notice of him and that are gathering around. Captain Bakugou however, is still blissfully unaware for the moment. But another trainee in Bakugou's vicinity points up at Eijirou, mouth agape in astonishment. When the blond finally turns, Eijirou uses the opportunity to hurl the arrow down at the captain's feet, waving once more with an almost cocky grin.

Bakugou doesn't dare send him home after that.



Eijirou is beyond thankful for the lake located just a few paces from the campsite. It may not be a hot spring in the mountains, but easing his muscles in cool water and being clean is a blessing all on its own.

He's free of all his bandages, and sighs in bliss as he sinks down into the water along the bank.

"Okay, time to get out." Denki squeaks, floating on a lily pad.

"We just got here." Eijirou mutters, tilting his head back into the water to wash away the sweat along his forehead.

"Yeah but if you float on your back any further the women are going to scream about a snake in the water."

Eijirou bolts upright, looking around to make sure no one else is nearby.

"Right, no floating. But you could at least keep watch for me."

"Hey, guardians need to relax too ya know. We've had a long day." Denki rolls onto his stomach on the lily pad, and Sero lays in a similar position on another leaf with all eight legs extended.

"I've had a long everything. This training is no joke. Besides, I chose a spot far from the path to camp. No one is going to -"

"WOOHOO SPLASH ZONE!!"

Eijirou can hardly flinch away from the rush of water that hits him in the face, and barely registers the sight of Denki's small, fuzzy body being thrown off the lily pad in and into the grassy field behind them. He immediately submerges his shoulders beneath the water, watching as Mina bursts from the dark depths of the lake, grinning ear to ear and pushing her hair away from her face.

"Hey, it's Rin!"

One more body makes contact with the water, though this time in a far more delicate dive. Eijirou recognizes the brunette who emerges and pokes her head above the surface of the water, but realizes he never got her name.

"So this is where you ran off to." Jirou's soft voice chuckles behind him.

He's surrounded on all sides by women. Three very. Naked. Women.

"U-Uh h-hey there." He squeaks, trying to put more space between them and takes a second to be thankful that his body can't be seen beneath the water in the low light of the disappearing sun.

"What a day, huh?" Mina sighs, leaning back into the water and kicking in a lazy backstroke. Eijirou does the polite thing and averts his eyes.

"I don't know if I wanted to pass out or throw up." The brunette comments. Her chubby cheeks puff out further and she lowers her chin and nose into the water to blow bubbles.

"I hope no one has continued to treat you poorly after that fight on your first day, Rin." Jirou smiles at him, soft and shy, much unlike the inspiring determination she showed during training.

Eijirou flushes, "Oh—no things were fine -"

"Oh, *Rin!*" Mina interrupts, swimming up to him suddenly, "we haven't properly introduced ourselves! I'm Mina," she giggles, "as you might have heard."

"I think you already know that I'm Jirou."

"And I'm *Ochako!*" The brunette shouts, no longer in the water, but perched on a rock inches above the lake's surface. Hands on her hips, shamelessly exposed with a grin on her face. "I'm going to be the best damn warrior my family has ever seen!"

Eijirou wants to drown, trying to discreetly turn away without raising any suspicion. Mina and Jirou laugh, fueling Ochako's humorous moment, until she loses her footing on the rocks and goes splashing down into the water again.

Now might be the chance for Eijirou to leave. Find a dry bank he can exit the

lake and carefully make his way back to the tent while the women laugh amongst themselves.

"It's great to meet you all, but wow I sure am tired. I should find where I left my towel and -"

"You can't go yet!" Mina swims around him, blocking his path.

"Yeah, we were just getting to know each other!" Ochako sputters as she wipes the water from her eyes.

"Tell me about your *hair*." Mina gasps, "I've never seen hair paint make such a *deep* shade of red."

"Well I -"

"You said you're a farmer right? You've got so many muscles, I was surprised that you struggled so much at the arrow challenge!"

"Oh uh -"

"Maybe that's why the Captain kept giving you a death glare today. He probably had some unreasonable expectations of you."

"I don't -"

Eijirou can hardly answer the questions being thrown at him. He really wants to leave, as nice as these women are, if Mina gets any closer she's going to brush against him and realize he's a little different from the rest of them.

There's a flash of yellow across Eijirou's field of vision, and a small yellow ball lands directly on top of Mina's head, resulting in an immediate scream of fear.

"WHAT IS IT WHAT IS IT?! GET IT OFF OF MEEEE!!"

Ochako and Jirou scramble to assist her, but the ball—that Eijirou now realizes is Denki—leaps off of Mina's head before anyone can touch him, and lands belly—down on Ochako's chest. She screams too, flailing to dislodge the rodent while splashing up waves of water in an attempt to swim further away.

It's his chance to escape while three women are thoroughly distracted. He gets to the bank, ensuring no one is looking his way as he pushes himself out of the water, quickly hiding himself beneath his towel and running off to find a secluded place to dress again.

He's halfway down the path back to camp when he can no longer hear the women screaming in terror. Eijirou truly hopes Denki didn't get himself injured.

"Well *that* was fun." Denki squeaks from the darkness. Eijirou nearly yells in surprise himself, not expecting his friend to return so soon.

"You're not hurt?" Eijirou asks, leaning down to pick up Denki in his palm. He's surprised to find Sero clinging to Denki's fur as well.

"No, Jirou picked me up and set me free in the grass." He grins, looking oddly love struck. "I think I like her the most."

"I never want to see a naked woman again."

Denki laughs, "Oh, I'll definitely keep a better eye out next time."

Eijirou doesn't realize until the last second that they're passing Monoma's tent. A much nicer, cleaner set up than what Captain Bakugou has, or any of the other women in the camp. But it's to be expected of someone who is employed by the Emperor.

What isn't expected is the argument going on inside the tent.

"Those *girls* are hardly fit to be called warriors. Even less than you are fit to be *captain*." Monoma sneers. "Once my report reaches the general none of you will ever see battle!"

"This conversation isn't over!" Bakugou snaps, but Monoma's condescending tone shows that he's hardly phased by the blond's aggression.

"Ah Bakugou, watch yourself there. Just because the General is your mother does not mean you are above me. *I* work for the emperor, remember?" Monoma scoffs, "and I didn't need to be handed that position either. Now leave. We are done here."

Eijirou tries to act casual when Bakugou storms out of the tent, but the Captain hardly acknowledges him.

"H-Hey, I learned some great fighting moves recently. We could take turns beating him up!" He smiles, trying to sound playful and encouraging all at once, but Bakugou only spares a passing glance before he continues on his way.

"You're a great captain!" Eijirou shouts after him. "I just wanted you to know that!"

He watches Bakugou disappear into the general campsite, memorizing the manly walk and wild hairstyle. If only Bakugou would notice him as more than just another soldier.

"Ooohh, look Sero—someone's in *loovveee*." Denki teases.

"Wha- ?! N-No!" A blush creeps up Eijirou's neck and face, instantly negating his verbal denial.

Denki shakes his head, not fooled for even a moment.

"Shouldn't you be getting to bed now? Soldiers need their beauty-sleep."

Eijirou opens his mouth to protest, but ultimately realizes that he has nothing else to do this late at night. So without another word, he returns to his tent, confident that Denki and Sero will return as well whenever they please.

Tonight, he can sleep in satisfaction and dream of Bakugou.



"For a long time we've been marching off to battle..." Jirou sighs.

Eijirou's ears perk up when Mina whistles a short tune.

Ochako groans and adds, "In this thundering herd we feel a lot like cattle."

Mina whistles the same tune again, a little longer this time, and just as Eijirou is about to question the song they've somehow coordinated, Mina's eyes light up.

"HEY! Think of instead a *boy* worth fighting for!"

Jirou, Ochako and Eijirou all look at her with obvious confusion. "Huh?"

"You heard me!" Mina throws her arm around Eijirou's shoulders, "a boy worth fighting for! I want his skin kissed by the sun, whose gaze is just for me -"

Ochako catches on quickly, flexing her arms. "My boy will praise me for my strength, and love my battle scars!"

"I don't much care for what he wears or what he looks like," Jirou looks away, blushing, "but if he sings that'd be quite alright."

Somehow, the three of them have pulled in more of the infantry into humming along to this sudden tune. They're loud enough to gain the attention of nearby villagers, and Eijirou has to hide behind Tetsu to avoid the suspicious gazes of the farmworkers that stare at him.

"Uh," Eijirou pipes up, "h-how about a boy who's kind of plain?" He shrugs, "but is always super kind?"

The girls pause, thinking for a moment and then shatter Eijirou's heart with a collective "NAH!!"

Monoma, riding his own horse alongside the group, decides it's acceptable for him to chime in. "I'll take a boy or girl who is unlike any other."

Ochako leans in close to Eijirou's ear, whispering. "I really doubt that he was loved by his own mother."

"What do we want?!" Mina belts over the group.

All the women answer back, "a boy worth fighting for!"

"Wish that I had.."

"A girl worth fighting -!"

Eijirou trips to a halt, slamming into the woman in front of him while he tries to maintain his grip on Tetsu's reins. The entire army has come to a sudden stop, but from his position within the group, Eijirou can't see anything yet but snow. He hadn't even realized they'd climbed the mountain that quickly when his friends had



thoroughly distracted him with an impromptu song.

Everyone slowly disperses, scouting the area in pairs and the tragic view finally comes into Eijirou's line of sight.

Burnt husks of modest homes is a bleak, black contrast to the falling white snow. In some areas, smoke still rises into the grey afternoon sky, as though the fires had occurred just moments before their arrival. Upon closer inspection to some of the homes, Eijirou can see pale, near-frozen bodies of villagers who had been unable to flee the devastation.

He's not sure if he's going to be sick or cry.

Bakugou, a few feet ahead, scans the area with obvious confusion and wrinkling his forehead. He is dismounting his horse by the time Eijirou walks closer, both of them looking for the answer to a question that has yet to be asked.

"I don't...understand..." Bakugou chokes in a low voice, "my mother should have been here..."

"Captain!" Someone's voice echoes from the otherside of the village and Bakuogu is rushing over without a second thought, Eijirou hot on his heels.

Jirou is waiting for them near the edge of a cliff, biting her lip with a heartbroken expression and hiding something behind her. "Captain... I-... I'm so sorry..."

She steps off to the side, revealing an abandoned General's helmet half buried in the snow. There are signs of a struggle, disturbed snow and dirt diluting a horrific amount of blood. Just a few yards away lies the edge of the cliff, and even Eijirou's stomach drops at the thought of how the general met her end.

Bakugou kneels in the snow, taking the helmet in his arms and curling his body over it almost protectively. Eijirou can't see his facial expressions anymore, but the shaking in Bakugou's shoulders tell him everything. He wants to offer comfort, a positive word, but he knows it's not the time nor his place to do so. So he waves at Jirou, silently walking back to where the rest of the group has gathered to let their Captain grieve as long as he needs.

Mere minutes pass before Bakugou arrives again, distress barely masked by familiar determination as he addresses his army.

"Our enemy is still headed towards the palace. Our only way of heading them off is through this mountain pass." His eyes darken as they flicker to the ground for a second. "We are the only hope for the Emperor now..." Bakugou stands tall, mounting his horse once again. "Let's fucking move out!"

Their journey continues in great silence. An unusual mix of sorrow, uneasiness and anger flowing throughout all members of the army. Eijirou can hardly appreciate the beauty of the snow capped mountains, knowing their enemies could attack at any moment or have already taken the Emperor's life and all their effort up to this point has been wasted.

He's so distracted by his own thoughts, Eijirou doesn't hear the rustling and crackling coming from the weapons wagon currently attached to Tetsu.

Electricity whips through the air, the pop of gunpowder echoes through the canyon and an explosive launches from the wagon, exploding against the face of the mountain.

Hundreds of eyes snap toward Eijirou, who turns towards the wagon and sees a very *guilty* looking Denki.

"What the fuck is wrong with you!?" Bakugou screams, suddenly inches from Eijirou's face. "Our position is compromised! Now we -"

There is a sickening sound of impact and an arrow lodges itself in Bakugou's chest, throwing him off his horse and into the snow. Distant, barbaric screams pour over a cliff of the mountain as their enemies appear on the cliffs above them. Though everyone readies a fighting position, a hail of arrows forces them to flee, unaware of a second cluster of enemies positioned on another cliff nearby, preventing any intention of running away.

"Rin! We need cannons!" Bakugou shouts from a short distance.

Eijirou can only push Tetsu so hard with the cannon wagon attached, but he makes it to a group of soldiers who scramble to unload their explosives. Within seconds, deafening sounds shake the earth and air as the ammunition makes impact with their enemy and the mountain side.

As quickly as it began, the rain of arrows ended, and the menacing threat of warriors on the mountains had disappeared.

"Hold." Bakugou's arm shoots out, commanding the cannons to cease fire. Dozens of eyes search the cliffs, waiting with bated breath for the attacks to start once more.

Like the rumble of rushing water, their enemies ride down the mountains at full speed, swords and arrows raised to strike. Eijirou can finally identify the one responsible for attacks on his homeland. Leading the charge is a mountain of a man, a muscular physique like Eijirou has never seen before. His face is obscured by a mask that had been carved to strike fear into onlookers, and bears no sword or bow. His fists, just as large as the rest of him, are encased in mangled metal gauntlets. Eijirou does not want to imagine the pain he could bring with those hands alone.

The sliding of readied swords rings from Eijirou's fellow soldiers, and the realization that this battle is theirs and theirs alone could not be more true than in this moment.

"There." Bakugou points at the leader, "That one in the front? Aim the cannons at Rappa. But if we must fight and if we must die, we die with heros." Their captain's face is stony and fearless. Eijirou believes that he too can have that fearlessness when Bakugou's eyes meet him for a brief second.

It's an unspoken acceptance that they *will* all die in this battle, but the clumps of snow falling off nearby cliffs cause Eijirou to realize that their fight does not have to start and end here.

He wastes no time leaping off of Tetsu's back, storming through the snow toward the cannon and snatching it away from the soldier's reach. The heavy object slows him down even more as he sprints straight towards the attackers, ignoring the shouts of his friends and captain for him to return. He has a plan. He knows what he's doing.

He just *hopes* it'll work.

*Rappa* is mere seconds away from reaching Eijirou and possibly basing his head in, but he slams the cannon down into the snow and aims it at the mountain just behind the oncoming army. It explodes against the rock, shaking loose the snow on it's peaks until it is rolling towards them all like a roaring storm.

Eijirou turns to run back towards his group, knowing that the odds of surviving the avalanche is pretty slim, even riding on Tetsu's back. But he barely makes it ten steps when *Rappa* appears beside him, growling like a wild animal and pulling his fist back to make contact with Eijirou's body. The impact, even though his armor makes a sickening crack and Eijirou is sent stumbling face down into the snow.

Most of *Rappa* has been buried by now, but the hulking man and his horse are still standing as the avalanche quickly approaches. Though Eijirou manages to make it back to Tetsu, the snow is building around them quickly. Eijirou looks around, ready to fight if *Rappa* is still chasing him but there is only snow behind him and his fellow soldiers running away in the distance.

Captain Bakugou is at the tail end of the retreating army however, about to be swept off the cliff by the avalanche.

"Bakugou!!" Eijirou reaches out for him, and barely manages to grab his captain's forearm just as his feet are swept out from under him and pulls him onto Tetsu's back.

His loyal horse works so hard, frantically trying to stay above the snow and get them all to safety. It seems like a true miracle when they do make it out of the danger zone, greeted by the relieved smiles of the other soldiers

Eijirou and Bakugou are both panting and flushed, coming off their adrenaline high and realizing that they *did* in fact, live through a near-death scenario.

"Rin," Bakugou's hand squeezes Eijirou's shoulder, "you are the *dumbest* fucking soldier I have ever met." He shakes his head, and his lips pull into a smile that Eijirou can't describe as anything except beautiful. "Somehow I knew it had to be you that saved me. I owe you my damn life."

"Rin is a hero!!" Mina and Ochako both cheer, encouraging the rest of the camp to follow suit.

Eijirou smiles full of pride and joy for a moment, until his head swims and his vi-

sion starts to flicker with black spots across his eyes.

"I -" He can't hold himself up any longer, and hardly feels himself totter sideways off Tetsu's back.

Several people scream, though it sounds like he's underwater now. Through the haze, Eijirou can make out Bakuoug's face above him, twisted in concern. He would much rather see that beautiful smile again.

"...hold on..."



Eijirou's body hurts so much, he just wants to go back to sleep and ignore his chores. Maybe if he doesn't move, mama won't come in and make him start his chores.

He closes his eyes, trying not to breathe too deeply to avoid the pain in his chest but nearly shoots up in bed when he realizes he is *very* much not home. He nearly screams in pain, but fully sits up just to assess his surroundings. He's alone inside a tent, one that looks similar to the tents they used at training camp. Seated on a thick bedroll and covered in at least three layers of blankets to keep out the cold mountain air.

There's a box of medical supplies a few feet away, and Eijirou looks down to realize his chest has been bandaged. A different kind of panic sets in. The healer probably saw his disguise, which means -

The tent flap swings open, and Monomo is standing in the snow-bright-light, glaring at him with all the hatred in the world.

"W-wait please -" Eijirou tries, but Monoma has a hand in his hair and on his arm, violently dragging him out of the tent and into the snow.

"Only someone sick in the head would pull an act this elaborate." He gives Eijirou a push, enough to get the red head face down in the snow again. "He's a man *pre-tending* to be a woman!!"

Bakugou's boots crunch in the snow until they're within Eijirou's view, though he is still staring at the ground, trying to bury his panic in determination.

"M-my name is Kirishima Eijirou!" He raises his head, meeting Bakugou's eyes. But instead of anger like he expected, the Captain just looks shocked.

"I just... I just wanted to fight and protect my homeland."

"Reckless insanity!!" Monomo shouts.

"I couldn't stand by and do *nothing*!" Eijirou defends, never breaking eye contact with Bakugou. "Please... I just wanted to protect my family."

Bakugou's gaze flickers away, and his arm extends towards Monomo without a word.

The other blond brings forth a sword a second later, looking smug as he pushes it into Bakugou's hand.

Eijirou's heart drops. He can't believe this. He worked so hard and actually thought for a moment, that Bakugou would understand his motivation, rather than seeing a man dressing up as a female soldier.

Monoma pushes Eijirou over onto his back, ignoring the hiss of pain and the fact that Eijirou probably has broken ribs. But Eijirou doesn't fight it. He knew from the beginning this would be the punishment. All he can do is close his eyes and wait for the pain to be over.

But the strike never comes. Instead, Bakugou drives his sword into the snow by his hip, turning away and biting his lip.

"You saved my life." He growls. "So I'm sparing every bit of yours." He faces the rest of the troops and starts walking away from where Eijirou lies. "Pack your shit, we're moving out."

Monoma sputters something unintelligible, waving his hands at Eijirou's unpunished form. Bakugou whips around, leaning close into Monoma's space and snarling.

"Didn't you hear me? Shut the fuck up, we are *leaving*."

They have the courtesy of leaving Tetsu and Eijirou's original camping supplies as they start to walk away. Mina, Ochako and Jirou both look back at him, sadness and concern obvious in their expressions, but Eijirou knows they could also face punishment if they tried to help him.

Eijirou lays in the snow until his hands go numb and the camp has long since disappeared over the horizon. Eventually, Denki and Sero scurry up to him, but all Eijirou can do is give them both a weak smile.

"Eijirou," Denki crawls closer. "I'm so -"

Eijirou shakes his head, wincing as he slowly sits up. "It's okay. Let's just go home."



The camp Eijirou has managed to start is small and weak, fighting against the icy breeze flowing through the mountains. They can't stay here long, but Eijirou needed to try and eat something before he even attempted getting down the mountain alone.

"At least..." Eijirou sighs, "I'll go home with everything intact except my dignity. I just... wanted to do the right thing for the people I care about."

"Hey," Denki crawls into Eijirou's lap, "you *did* do the right thing. Just because you



didn't stay home and wait for the fight to come to you, doesn't mean you were *wrong*."

"Yeah." Eijirou tries to smile, but it feels forced. "All I can do now is hope that Bakugou succeeds."

When the fire burns out, and they are ready to continue their journey home, a roaring scream echoes throughout the mountain, shaking Eijirou to the core and startling Tetsu. Eijirou and Denki peer over the edge of a nearby cliff where the avalanche snow now rests. From a distance, Rappa and several of his men can be seen digging their way out of the snow, slowly marching down the mountain in the same direction as the Emperor's Palace.

Eijirou secures his belongings to Tetsu and seats himself properly, steering them all along the same route his camp took.

"Uh, Eijirou." Denki says from his shoulder. "I thought we were going home."

"I can't just leave Baku- I mean, I have to warn them before it's too late!"

"But you're injured! And if Rappa's men can survive an avalanche then there's no telling what they'll do to you!"

"It's the right thing to do, Denki."

Denki sighs, but nods. "You're right. You're also *crazy*! You're absolutely right! Let's go save the Emperor!!"



The city surrounding the palace is packed with civilians holding an impromptu celebration over the victory of Bakugou's army. It's difficult to push his way through the crowd, trying to follow the sounds of music and cheering in order to reach his friends or former Captain.

"Excuse me," Eijirou says to an imperial guard walking by, "I have a message for -"

The guard either doesn't hear him or ignores him and continues walking on. Eijirou tries to get the attention of several other people but most of them shove him away or don't acknowledge him. He's no closer to the edge of the crowd where he needs to be, but no one will help get his message to a higher authority.

"Does no one care that they are in danger?!" Eijirou nearly stomps his feet against the cobbled ground.

"Everyone wants to celebrate," Denki assures from his shoulder. "Ignoring a potential threat is way easier when you're parading your heroes around before the Emperor."

Eijirou huffs and goes back to his original plan of just trying to reach someone in the parade. Mina, Jirou or Ochako will surely believe him, but it would be *better* if he could just get Bakugou's attention.

The soldiers are nearly at the doors of the palace. Eijirou practically tackles people out of his way just to rush to the front of the celebration.

"Captain Bakugou!" Eijirou shouts, pushing away the hands of several people who try to drag him back into the crowd. "Captain, you gotta listen to me!"

"What the *fuck* Kirishima?!" Bakugou slows his horse. "You were supposed to go home."

"Rappa is still alive! I saw him headed this way from the mountains."

"There's no way he survived that, if you're just trying to get on my good side so you can play dress up again you better just leave *now*."

"No! I-I'm not!" Eijirou pleaded. "Bakugou, I told you I was trying to do the right thing. I want to protect my home and these *people*." He waves an arm to gesture to the thousands of civilians behind him. "Why would I lie to you when other's lives are at stake?"

Bakugou stares him down, long and silent, with eyes that can still burn into Eijirou's soul like fire. For a second, Eijirou is certain that Bakugou is going to say he believes him, to immediately turn and alert his troops.

Instead, the blond nudges at his horse again, and continues forward in the parade without another word.

"Bakugou wait—!" He tries to chase the captain, only to be held back *again* by judgemental onlookers who look ready to fight.

Mina, Jirou and Ochako happen to pass in that moment, lighting up with smiles as they spot Eijirou.

"Hey!" Eijirou flashes them a brief smile, but knows this isn't the time for a re-union. "Listen, Rappa is still alive and he might already be here. I... I don't know if the Captain believed me but, keep an eye out okay? We don't want to be surprised by the attack."

The trio nods, and after they walk away again, he can see them whispering to the other soldiers, passing along the message quickly so no one is caught off guard.

Once they're out of ear shot, Eijirou turns his head a bit to get Denki's attention, who is still resting in the collar of his clothing.

"Go wait with Tetsu and Sero." He commands.

"What?! I can't leave you all alone! I'm your *guardian*, I'm supposed to protect you!" Denki argues.

"And you've done a great job of that. But I don't want *you* getting hurt when this breaks out into another fight. Please Denki. I promise I'll be alright."

There's no movement for a few seconds, but Eijirou can hear Denki's tiny sigh and then shuffling movement as he crawls down to the ground.

"Come back in one peace." He says, before disappearing between the feet of the crowd.

Eijirou rushes to be closer to the palace doors, waiting with bated breath as crowds and music fall silent once the Emperor makes his appearance.

Eijirou has heard tales that their Emperor was once a man of impressive size and muscle, who led their nation with determination and an endless smile. Who led, and continues to lead the people without fault or failure. Though the muscles have faded and his hair has dulled, Emperor Toshinori still wears the same smile.

"Thanks to our brave warriors, our nation is once again at peace!" Toshinori's voice carries well over the crowd. "Despite devastating losses, the noble Captain Bakugou has led this group of strong women to be a symbol of victory!"

The crowd erupts in cheers, and Eijirou wishes he could see Bakugou's expression in this moment.

The Emperor addresses Bakugou directly, voice no longer audible to the crowds. But Eijirou can see the Captain nod and respond, bowing deeply and raising his head high with pride.

From Eijirou's place, he sees something moving along the upper balcony of the palace, but he's too slow to react or shout before several of Rappa's men drop down behind the Emperor, grabbing ahold of him by each arm and running away into the palace.

Bakugou and his soldiers try to chase after them but are unable to force the door open again. Rappa's guttural laugh can be heard from above, and even Eijirou knows they don't have long before the Emperor faces a tragic fate.

"Captain!" Eijirou sprints up to the other man, who's glare softens once their gazes meet.

"I didn't react fast enough!" Bakugou growls, "I was on guard the whole time and I still -"

"Hey," Eijirou lays a hand on his shoulder. "It's okay, we're gonna get him back." He looks around at the other women, who seem to be looking at *him* for further direction. "I have a plan, and I'm going to need all everyone's help."

Bakugou doesn't hesitate to nod in agreement. "You lead, we'll follow."



Getting past Rappa's soldiers is *difficult*, but even his trained men aren't immune to the lure of a pretty woman's smile and a blunt object to the back of the head. Bakugou and Eijirou manage to make it to the palace floor where Rappa is holding the Emperor hostage.

"The poor, weak Emperor." Rappa laughs, "can't even put up a good fight anymore!"

What a waste to go through all this effort for someone who isn't even a match for my strength!"

Toshinori looks a little bloodied, but is otherwise one peace. If Eijirou and Bakugou don't act quickly, that might not be the case much longer.

"You get the Emperor." Eijirou whispers, "I'll distract the big guy."

Bakugou nods, moving to sneak to a better vantage point to grab the Emperor once Rappa's attention is elsewhere. "Don't die, idiot."

"If only there was *someone* worthy of a fight! I wouldn't even waste my time on those pathetic soldiers who rely on weapons and firepower!"

"Hey!" Eijirou shouts, taking a fighting stance despite the trembling in his core. "You want someone to fight, fight *me*!"

Rappa's laugh booms again. "Ah! The brave one who thought he could end my life with a rocket and an avalanche! How brave of you to come forward again and face me!" Surprisingly, he removes his metal gauntlets, cracking his knuckles so roughly that Eijirou is sure they should be broken.

"Prove to me you're a true warrior!" He raises his fists and approaches Eijirou. "No weapons, no explosives, just the strength of your body."

Eijirou glances behind Rappa, waiting for Bakugou to usher the Emperor to safety before staring back at the larger man dead in the eyes. "You're on!"

Almost immediately, Eijirou starts to doubt he's going to survive this fight. Rappa attacks him with more speed than could be expected of someone his size, and his punches knock every bit of wind out of Eijirou's lungs, even without the metal gloves. He tries to make Rappa chase him across the balcony, focusing less on his own offense and more on protecting his body from further injury.

Eijirou can feel his body fatiguing, while Rappa doesn't even appear to be breaking a sweat. They're finally at another side of the palace, away from the eyes of the crowds below and any risk that Rappa would go after an innocent bystander just for fun.

"You *are* a worthy opponent little man! Such a shame your days as a fighter are about to end! Feel honored that *I* have acknowledged you without the use of your meager weapons." Rappa lands two more hits, and it's just enough to send Eijirou crumpling to the ground, winded, bloodied and in pain.

Rappa pulls his arm back, winding up a final hit. "Perhaps we will fight again, in another life."

"HEY!" A different shout has Rappa and Eijirou looking up to see Bakugou poised with another cannon. "Fight for your life in *hell*."

The cannon booms, and Eijirou has just enough time to duck beneath the half wall of the balcony before Rappa is sent flying off the edge, crashing into the roof of another building below and exploding again on a second impact.

The building erupts into flames, and through the building smoke, Eijirou can see a broken, motionless silhouette on the ground below.

Not having the energy for words, Eijirou can only smile up at Bakugou, wiping the blood away from his face and finally allowing himself to relax, despite the desire to simply pass out.

Bakugou helps him stand, letting Eijirou lean on him as they make their way back to the palace doors, where the rest of the women and the Emperor wait once more.

"Him!" Monomo is the first to scream, pointing at Eijirou. "Your Excellency, *that* man had the audacity to infiltrate this army in a *woman's* disguise! He should be locked up for the rest of his life!"

Mina, Jirou and Ochako stand between them and Monoma, hands on their swords should the blond make any further moves.

"Stand down." Emperor Toshinori commands gently. "Everybody. We've had enough violence for one evening." He turns towards Kirishima, who is still leaning heavily on Bakugou's support.

"Kirishima Eijirou, you've disobeyed direct orders regarding the imperial army and risked the lives of your village for the sake of your own heroism. My palace is destroyed, and you, my son, appear to be near the brink of death after your fight."

Eijirou's face flushes hot with embarrassment, trying to form the right words to show his remorse. But the Emperor continues before he can finish his thought.

"You, Kirishima Eijirou, have saved my life and the lives of the nation twice over. We are all forever in your debt." Toshinori bows to Eijirou, much to the shock of everyone around them and gives the young man a smile that melts away any remaining fears of punishment he may have had.

"Thank you, your Majesty." Eijirou says shyly, forcing himself to stand upright despite Bakugou's hovering. "It was an honor to serve you and fight for our people."

Toshinori smiles wider. "Perhaps, it is time to give brave men like you a chance another chance to do the same. Men and women should *both* be allowed to become soldiers, side by side. You should be the one to guide them, Kirishima." He gestures towards Bakugou, "alongside Captain Bakugou, if he'll have you."

Bakugou's face flares red, and his expression twists into an embarrassed scowl.

"Thank you, your Excellency, but I really need to get home to my family again." He smiles at Bakugou, "but I know future soldiers will be in good hands under a great Captain such as him."

Ochako leads Tetsu to him, and several hands assist him in mounting his steed for the last time.

The bag Tetsu is still carrying rustles, and Eijirou looks down to Denki's relieved expression looking back at him, and one of Sero's legs moving in a way that might



be considered a wave. He smiles, glad to have all his animal friends save in one place and pats Tetsu's neck, waving the soldiers and Emperor goodbye through a tired smile.

"Let's go home Tetsu."



His parents are working the garden when he arrives back in his village a few days later. Several of their neighbors stepped out of their homes, whispering and watching the return of their local hero.

It takes Eijirou longer than he would have liked to dismount from Tetsu, and slowly make his way towards his parents as quietly as possible.

"Mama, papa!" He calls, and when their heads turn, both of them drop their tools and a basket of vegetables to rush over to their son. His mother's voice breaks into a sob, and though Eijirou can tell it takes them a lot of self-control not to hug him, they pat his face and touch him gingerly, as though he would disappear in the blink of an eye.

"You're alive!" His father gasps. "Oh Eijirou, we didn't know if you would make it home!"

"And your hair!" His mother runs her hands through his red strands. "I've never seen such a color!" She smiles through the stream of tears, "you look so handsome."

"I'm sorry." Eijirou sighs, struggling to hold back his own tears of relief. "I'm sorry I had to leave like that. I just wanted to do the right thing, I wanted to protect you two before our enemies could get to the village. I -"

"Eijirou," his father interrupts, squeezing his shoulder gently. "We love you son, and we can only be proud that you would be so brave."

"I missed you guys." Eijirou chokes, tears finally falling from his eyes.

"We missed you too, Eijirou." They both hug him lightly, and it's the best feeling in the world to be surrounded by his parents' love. "Welcome home."

"E-excuse me." A gruff voice clears, startling the family out of their reunion. "I was told... this is the Kirishima household."

The three of them turn, and Eijirou's eyes light up at the sight of his captain standing on his family's land.

"Baku—Captain!" He shakes his head, struggling to find his voice. "What are you doing here?!"

"I couldn't... you're really—ugh!" Bakugou's fists clench by his side, and when he

closes the distance between them, Eijirou worries for a second that he's about to be punched again. "You're stupidly strong and I've never met who I thought was worthy of being my equal. But you... I—maybe we could -"

Eijirou saves him the effort, taking one of Bakugou's hands in his hand and smiling. "You could stay for dinner, and we could talk some more. How does that sound?"

Bakugou swallows, and nods once, squeezing Eijirou's hand in confirmation. "Dinner sounds great."

"Mama!" Eijirou shouts, turning towards his parents who are still standing a few feet away. "We have a guest tonight!" He sees his mother's mouth agape, and for a second, is worried that he's going to have to have an awkward conversation with her right in front of Bakugou.

"See?" His father nudges his mother with a smirk. "I told you he wasn't interested in women."

"I wouldn't be either with a man as handsome as this!" His mama grins, approaching Bakugou with open arms and pulling him into a tight hug. "Welcome to the family, Bakugou!"

"Mama! It's just dinner!"

"Oh Eijirou hush. You're not letting a fine specimen like this get away." she gets a headstart on returning to the house, pulling her husband along behind her. "We're going to make all the secret family recipes. A way to a man's heart is through his stomach you know!"

Eijirou laughs, and walks beside Bakugou as they follow his parents. "By the way, how do you feel about mice and spiders?"





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# From Out of the Sea

A *Little Mermaid* AU by Trish in collaboration with Eemi (previous)

"This is a very bad idea sire! Listen, if we stop right here, we can go back and we can pretend that this never happened and I won't even think of telling your mot—" the small muttering crab is cut off by Prince Katsuki nearly wrapping his entire body into his fist.

"You aren't telling my mother, *anything*. Got it?" Katsuki squeezes his fist a little tighter, and the small crab, Izuku Midoriya, whimpers. Katsuki is about to let him go, but a noise makes his fingers flex subconsciously as he holds his breath. Izuku squirms, but Katsuki squeezes yet again to shut him up. He'll be fine not breathing for a second, but if Katsuki gets caught and his mother finds out? Well, he'll quit breathing permanently. With a nervous flick of his fins, Katsuki propels him and Izuku ever so slightly to peek around a dark corner to try to see what the noise was.

Off in the distance, one of the palace guards is swimming along, seemingly blind to them as he goes about his duties. Once the guard is out of sight, Katsuki sighs out a breath of relief and releases Izuku, who begins dramatically clutching at the air bubbles created from their movements.

"C'mon nerd, time to move."

Before Izuku can say a word, Katsuki grabs him once more and swims as fast as he can, the palace quickly fading behind them.



The small cave hidden behind a thick layer of kelp feels like home the second Katsuki swims into it, and when Izuku is pushed into the space, even he can't soften his gasp as his wide eyes take in everything around them.

The walls of the cave are tall and jagged, little tufts of seaweed grow from the sand and snake up towards the surface. Small clusters of mussels group in darkened crags and a few fish dart in and out of the quiet space. But it isn't the natural beauty that has Izuku staring in wonder, it's the collection of objects that line its walls. Rows and rows of Katsuki's found treasures and trinkets glint in the soft lighting pouring in from the exposed opening above, creating a mesmerizing light show as the tide moves the water, its waves making the water around them ripple and shimmer. It's beautiful somehow; the arrangement of broken bits of metal and chipped porcelain, small statues, and strange tools Katsuki can only begin to imagine the use for. It's home to a hodgepodge of stolen artifacts from the surface, the forbidden place Katsuki desperately wishes he could belong to. A place where he

could be free from restrictions, the constricting rules of the royal court or the expectations from his mother; a place where he could finally be himself.

Before he even realizes it, his fins are carrying him to one of the walls, his hands already reaching out to brush his fingers across cool pronged metal. It's his newest addition and quickly becoming one of his favorites. It looks almost like a miniature version of the same trident his mother wields, only this one is a tarnished silver color, not the same shimmery gold of his mother's trident. Katsuki picks it up to show Izuku who still hasn't spoken.

"Look at this stuff, isn't it neat?" he asks boastfully as he holds up the small silver object for Izuku to see.

"Kacchan..." Izuku starts, the nickname instantly making Katsuki's skin prickle. It wasn't "Sire" or "Prince" like Katsuki insisted he be called, it was the dumb childhood nickname Izuku gave him way before his mother declared his once best friend his sudden babysitter. *Advisor*, is what she called him. Backstabber is what he heard.

"Don't call me that," Katsuki spat.

Izuku's eyes swept around the room once more before fixing his gaze back to Katsuki. "Kacchan," he repeats, ignoring Katsuki's orders, "This is too much."

Of course he'd say that.

With a scoff and a roll of his eyes, Katsuki gives one last stroke to the... he squints at the metal in his palm. *Dinglehopper*, he thinks, grinning to himself at the name he just came up with for his newest little treasure, and sets it down on the jagged shelf next to his other beloved objects. Turning around, he faces Izuku who is still anxiously looking around the cave.

"Wouldn't you think my collection's complete?"

The question startles Izuku, his eyes focusing back to Katsuki, "Kac—"

"Sure," Katsuki says, swimming upwards and gesturing towards the natural formed shelves where more of his collection sits, "You'd think I have everything. I've got gadgets and gizmos aplenty, I've got whozits and whatzits galore. Fuck, like look at these." Katsuki reaches out to grab into a small box, pulling out one of his *thin-gamabobs*, a small object with a wooden handle and a swirly piece of sharp metal attached in the center and raises it for Izuku to see, giving it a bit of a wave. "I've got *twenty*," he admits before tossing it back into the box with the others, "But who cares? No big deal... I want *more*."

At that, Izuku stiffens. "You can't," he says, "You have to stop this Kacchan, it's too dangerous!"

Katsuki's lip curls into a sneer. Already he feels too hot, like his blood is beginning to boil. He'd had this same exact conversation with his mother, the one where she not only reprimanded him for going to the surface despite her orders, the place he felt like he truly belonged, but also turned his best friend into one of her snitches.

"Shut up!" Katsuki snaps, glaring at his *advisor*. "It isn't *dangerous*! You and your new *best friend*," the two words nearly making him gag as he pushes them out of his mouth, "are just delusional. How can some place that makes such wonderful things be *bad*? Huh?"

With a sigh, Izuku swims over to him, apparently oblivious to the rage bubbling under Katsuki's skin, and stops just a few inches from his face. "How many times do I have to tell you Kacchan? You're still my best friend."

He looks so earnest, so utterly believable that Katsuki almost falls for it.

Almost.

He flips him off instead. "Yeah, yeah, that's why you agreed to be my damn babysitter? Because we're *best friends*?"

"*Advisor*," Izuku corrected with a huff, "Not a babysitter. And it's my job to tell you not just as your appointed advisor, but as your *friend* when you are doing something stupid. It's why your mom gave me the job to begin with. She thought I'd be the one you'd listen to, can't understand why she'd think you'd listen to *anyone*, but yeah. Look, I don't understand your... infatuation with going to the surface, but please Kacchan, promise me that you'll stop."

If Katsuki is being honest with himself, he doesn't quite understand his "infatuation" as Izuku puts it, either. Feelings aren't exactly his strong suit anyway, and so he's never been able to put into words how out of place he feels. And even when he has voiced his unease out loud, no one else seems to understand the itch under his skin, the way his own tail sometimes feels foreign and wrong to him, like the body he was born into isn't the one he was meant to have.

When he sleeps at night, he doesn't dream of swimming through the depths of the ocean, but rather the feeling of walking on two legs upon the shore. He dreams about being human, of being free.

Free from the obligations of being a prince meant to rule under the sea alongside his family; free from being confined to the darkness of the ocean.

Free to be *himself*.

So this collection of his, the one that has him sneaking out way past the safety of the palace walls isn't just a hobby. No, it's more than that. Being able to hold pieces from up on the surface in his own hands, being surrounded by objects made by and for humans; It makes him feel like he's a part of their world. And his little cave hidden away from the prying eyes of his mother feels more like his home than any part of the ocean ever has, including his own palace. It's why he's brought Izuku here in the first place. Katsuki thought if maybe he saw it, swam through the quiet cavern himself and got to see Katsuki with the things he loved the most, he'd understand and maybe even want to help him.

But judging by the pleading look in Izuku's eyes, Katsuki can see that he was

wrong to assume anyone else would get it. With grit teeth, Katsuki answers him with a simple, "I won't stop. Not ever."

"Then I will have to stop you," Izuku replies.

Katsuki looks at him, his tiny body full of determination and it makes him laugh at the thought of Izuku ever being able to make him do anything, much less stop him.

He isn't worried.



When Katsuki wakes up the next morning, lazily stretching under the dull shimmering rays of the sun that manage to weakly penetrate the darkness of the ocean, he doesn't immediately bolt out of bed. Instead he takes his time blinking the sleep from his eyes, almost enjoying himself as he lays around peacefully in the quiet of his bedroom.

Then it hits him.

It's quiet.

*Too quiet.*

Typically, most mornings Katsuki's cursing up a storm, lyrics to go along with the beat of Izuku's obnoxiously persistent knocking on his door. A song they've performed together every morning for as long as he can remember. Until today. As soon as Katsuki registers the absence of that annoying sound, he's instantly swimming out of his room. The trip to his mother's chamber isn't a long one, but getting there seems to take forever. It feels like his fins can't move fast enough. His heart beats frantically in his chest, belly filling with dread as he throws open the doors to find himself looking into an empty room.

His mother's gone.

Izuku's missing.

He knows exactly what it means.

With a scream, he swims as fast as he can toward his cave, begging with all of his might that he's wrong; that Izuku hasn't betrayed him. The twist of anxious ire in his gut tells him he shouldn't hold his breath.

It's hard leaving the palace with guards seemingly poised at every exit. Another bad sign. Luckily, he has a few spots he hasn't told Izuku about and succeeds in sneaking out through one of them. He hates having to use this secret opening because it forces him farther away from his cave, but it's the safest, the one he's least likely to get caught using. After pushing past the loose stones, he's outside of the walls, carefully swimming through the thick forest of kelp toward the one place he needs to be.



Just as he emerges through the tangles of kelp, something grabs him forcefully by the arm. He raises a fist with his free hand, instinct preparing him to strike.

*"I dare you, Katsuki."*

He freezes, glaring up into the fierce eyes of the last person he wants to see. After a few tense blinks, he begrudgingly lowers his fist.

"Good morning, mother."

Looking far more smug than usual, which was a sort of accomplishment on its own, Queen Mitsuki sneers at her son. "Audience chamber. Now." Her voice leaves no room for argument and without an option, Katsuki has no choice but to swim after her and her guard. More guards fall into place from behind, boxing Katsuki in, as if he's a dangerous flight risk. He rolls his eyes at the overkill and when he looks forward again, it's only then that he notices Izuku swimming silently next to his mother. The snitching bastard.

As Katsuki swims alongside his captors back to the palace, his eyes never stray from Izuku. It makes him smile to see the little betrayer trembling the entire time.

Once they reach the large room, Queen Mitsuki shoos away the guard with a wave of her hand. "No one comes in, even if you hear screaming," she tells them, fixing Katsuki with a stare that makes him scoff. Izuku too is about to leave, but Mitsuki brings him to a halt.

"Stay Izuku."

With a nod, he returns back to her side, refusing to look at Katsuki. When the final guard leaves the room, quietly closing the door behind him, the screaming begins.

"SECRET ENTRY WAYS, KATSUKI!?! ARE YOU INSANE?!?" The queen bellows, her face contorted with rage.

"Yeah," Katsuki deadpans. "Insane to trust that idiot to keep his mouth shut."

Izuku has the decency to at least look bashful.

"Well *that idiot*, sorry Izuku dear, is the only reason why I am letting you live," she pauses to snort ungracefully. "He said I'd miss you. As if."

Katsuki rolls his eyes.

Suddenly, there are hands on his face and his mother is glaring into his eyes, but behind the anger Katsuki can see there is real fear there. She's worried, genuinely worried and it's that look that gets him to keep his mouth shut. He swallows the rude comment he had planned on making.

"Katsuki. Please. For once in your life, listen to me. It isn't *safe*. I cannot protect you outside of these walls. Shut up and don't fight me on this," she huffs, gripping his face harder when he tries to move away. "There have been reports coming in from all over an—"

"There are *always* going to be reports about the humans!" Katsuki groans, shoving out of his mother's grip. "That doesn't make them dangerous!"

"Humans? I'm not talking about humans, Katsuki! I'm talking about Monoma!"

His body goes cold, as if his very bones are being chilled from the inside out at that name alone. Suppressing a shiver, Katsuki raises an eyebrow. "Neito Monoma? The Sea Witch?"

"Of course, the Sea Witch, you brat. Why else do you think I've been trying to keep your stubborn ass inside?!"

"I figured it was just because you like to see me suffer," Katsuki says, shrugging his shoulders, to which the queen rolls her eyes.

"Well that too, but still, I care about you for some reason and I have this parental obligation to keep you alive." The hand on his face is back, and it strokes against his cheek fondly. "He's bad news, Katsuki. You know what he's capable of."

There isn't a soul in the ocean who hasn't heard of the horrors the Sea Witch is capable of. Growing up, Katsuki had assumed he was just a tale told to children in the dark, something to keep them in line and well behaved. It wasn't until he was older, when his mother deemed him an appropriate age to show him the reports, that he was shocked to discover it was all real.

The stories he's been given to read are gruesome, terrible things that Katsuki privately wishes he could unknow. The Sea Witch is often described using his dark magic to destroy and deceive his fellow merfolk, tangling them up in his webs of deceit, chaos, and pain. Katsuki doesn't understand how so many can be stupid enough to get fooled by such a foul being, but he doesn't voice that part out loud. He's a prince after all, and he does have a little decorum.

"I don't see what he has to do with me though," Katsuki sniffs. "You think *I'd* fall for his tricks?"

With a sigh, the queen pats his face again, this time a bit harder than necessary. "I *know* you would. So *please, behave.*"

Katsuki sighs, giving one curt nod. A lie, but she doesn't need to know that. Already he's thinking of which spots Izuku can't possibly be aware of and how he can ditch him to make his next escape. Sea Witch be damned, there's nothing that can keep Katsuki stuck here. Not if he can help it.

The queen stares at him, her eyes narrowing infinitesimally, before widening in a way that makes Katsuki hold his breath. She's up to something, he knows it. With a smirk, she tilts her head in Izuku's direction.

"Izuku," she calls out, eyes still on her son. "You are to stay attached to my son, fin to claw. Day and night, no exceptions. If he so much as breathes out of place you are to report to me immediately, do you understand?"

"Yes, ma'am," Izuku, the scum sucking backstabber, agrees softly.

“HEY WH—”

“*And* you are to report any new spots this slimy eel finds himself able to wiggle out of. Understood?”

Unable to take anymore, Katsuki flips both of them off as he turns tail, swimming out of the room with as much dignity as he can muster, pointedly ignoring Izuku who dutifully swims to follow after him.

“I’m sorry Kacchan,” he says softly once he’s within earshot.

Katsuki ignores that too.



True to his word, Izuku never leaves Katsuki’s side. By day three, Katsuki’s actively plotting out loud exactly how he’ll flay Izuku alive when the crab finally snaps.

“I WAS ORDERED!” He yells. “I DON’T HAVE A CHOICE!”

Katsuki sneers, “And if she ordered you to swim directly into a tsunami?”

“IF IT MEANS PROTECTING YOU? ABSOLUTELY!”

Izuku’s practically vibrating with emotion. Katsuki isn’t sure which emotion exactly—probably rage, maybe even hatred—but he’s slightly impressed to see the little bastard sticking up for himself. Only slightly though. Most of him is still mad as hell he can’t even use the bathroom alone. Izuku takes his job *very* seriously. But even he has a breaking point apparently, because with a huff he starts swimming towards the door of Katsuki’s bedroom.

“Five minutes. I need five minutes away from you, and I swear on your life if you do *anything* while I am gone, I *will* go straight to your mother and I will ask to help her *flay* you.” Without a second glance, Izuku leaves him alone for the first time in days.

Despite finally getting his wish and having precious alone time away from the crab, Katsuki doesn’t actually have any plans of escape.

At least not until he hears the loud booming from outside of his bedroom and the flash of light that follows after. In his opinion, he shouldn’t be held responsible for what he does next, which is to obviously escape through the opening of his aperture. Honestly, he doesn’t have a choice. If anything, this is Izuku’s fault for not being here to stop him. Katsuki lets these thoughts propel him out of the opening toward the commotion.

Outside, he’s practically invisible as guards scramble across the courtyard, too busy barking orders at each other to even notice Katsuki skulking through the large intricate decorative coral growths. It’s comically easy to slip past two arguing guards, both of them placing bets over what exactly is happening and Katsuki makes a mental note to tell his mother she needs to tighten security measures

as he slips past them completely undetected. As quickly and stealthily as he can manage, Katsuki makes his way towards the source of disruption and it isn't long before he finds himself swimming below what is clearly a sinking ship.

Large slabs of wood come crashing down, swarms of bubbles threatening to pull him deeper into the ocean by the vortex created by them. Katsuki's forced to swim hurriedly from side to side in order to avoid being hit. He's only ever seen the aftermath of a sinking ship, and though he knows this is dangerous, his heart races all the same knowing how *close* he is to real live humans.

Even if he sees just *one* human, he'll be happy.

Naturally, Katsuki throws away every rule his mother has ever embedded in his head, dangers of being seen be damned. With a powerful flick of his tail, the prince swims toward the surface. Once his head breaks above water he gasps at the chaos around him. Planks of wood bob in and out of the water in time with the choppy waves, some of them containing a bright colored orange wave dancing on top of it. The same type of bright wave that's all over the half-sunk ship as well.

Katsuki's never seen anything like it before. Swimming closer to one of the floating wood hunks with the strange flickering wave, he pulls it towards him for a closer examination. Up close, a heat rolls off of the wave, reminding him of the hydro-thermal sea vents he once visited as a child. Surely nothing can be as hot as that? Curiously, Katsuki plunges his hand into the wave.

Horrible mistake.

A pain unlike anything he's ever known scorches his hand, and a scream wracks its way out of his open mouth. Dunking his hand back into the sea water pulls a second scream from him, the salt biting cruelly at his wound, intensifying the pain instead of lessening it as he'd hoped. So wrapped up in his own bubble of pain, Katsuki doesn't realize a voice calling out to him.

"You there! Stay calm! I'll pull you up!"

Looking up with his injured hand clutched to his chest, Katsuki spots the distinct figure of a human man, standing up on the railing of the boat, and for just a moment, his pain is momentarily forgotten.

The horribly bright colored waves rise high around the man, creating a terrifying background against the sinking ship and the deep blackened blue of the night sky. Still, even from far away, Katsuki can't help but watch in awe as the human moves. Thick legs carry the man gracefully as he hurries along the edge of the ship. His arms are outstretched, each spreading out taunt away from his body in an odd way. It takes Katsuki a second to realize that it must be so he can stay upright. Each crash of a wave against the ship threatens to throw the man overboard, but as he walks, he adjusts his arms in order to stay perfectly balanced. It's beautiful to watch, and though his hand aches something fierce, Katsuki can't help but vaguely feel it's worth it as he watches this human make his way towards the end of the ship.

"Alright!" The man suddenly calls out, stirring Katsuki from his wide-eyed stare. He's now holding an armful of rope and begins to unravel it, extending down toward the water. "Grab hold and I'll pull you up! C'mon, swim to me!"

A part of him, an irrational and obviously insane part of him, *almost* makes him actually start swimming towards the man. Then reality hits him. Hard.

Katsuki can't get pulled into the ship, not without exposing what he is! Though, he's tempted. So very tempted. Despite all the dangers, the thrill of being even closer to this human sends his heart racing even faster. But the idea of being *killed* by a human, something inevitable according to his mother, isn't something he wants to entertain. He'd hate to give his mother the satisfaction of being right. It hurts, denying himself the very thing he wants, but Katsuki knows he needs to swim away. With one last look, Katsuki soaks in the image of the human screaming at him in a valiant attempt to save him before letting his body sink back beneath the water.

A sudden rush of bubbles forcibly pushes air into his gills, making him choke as he flips his fins, bringing himself back up to the surface in his panic. The assumption that another hunk of the boat has fallen into the water is quickly brought to rest when a warm hand weaves its way around his bicep, tugging at him.

"Stay with me! I've got you!"

The human had jumped in after him. The human's *touching* him. He's never been more thrilled or more terrified in his existence.

Katsuki feels frozen as he lets the human hold him, his legs thrashing wildly in some pathetic imitation of swimming. The waves around them are choppy and ruthless, slamming them under repeatedly, the human choking with each deep inhale whenever his head hits the surface along with strangled sounding words of encouragement aimed at Katsuki.

"It's okay," the human says before his head's covered by a wave. He coughs to expel water from his mouth as he continues to kick his legs, a sorry attempt to keep them from going under. "You'll be okay, I'll save you."

True, Katsuki doesn't *need* saving, but he can't pull himself out of the arms of the human. The human's grip on Katsuki is warm, and though his hold is painfully hard, his hand's soft. Fleeting, Katsuki wonders what it might feel like to hold it between his own rough palms.

Without warning, there's a loud groan of wood creaking followed by a loud *snap*! There isn't much time to process, but it's evident that a huge beam of the ship is crashing right for them. Something hard shoves at Katsuki's chest, pummeling him backwards just before the huge wooden chunk comes crashing down onto the surface, having missed him by inches. The force of the beam pushes more choppy waves around him, threatening to pull him back under as the wood begins to sink. Sucking in a deep breath, Katsuki moves to run webbed fingers through his hair, a nervous gesture, and realizes something's missing. There's no longer a hand on his arm. In a panic, Katsuki begins scanning the surface of the water for signs of his



human savior. But he sees nothing but the ship's destruction.

Hastily, Katsuki dives under the water, adjusting his eyes as he scans the depths as well as he can. He spots the human, pinned under the sinking beam as it makes the descent towards the ocean floor below. As quickly as he can, Katsuki swims to the human and grabs at him, trying not to panic as fresh red swirls around them with the movement.

Blood. And a lot of it.

*"The only good human, is a dead human,"* his mother once told him. A thought that seems to be echoed across all of Atlantis. But as Katsuki swims towards the human, the human who tried to save him without a second thought, he finds himself thinking, *not this one*. Katsuki will do whatever he can to return the favor, to hell with the consequences.

The human's arm is quite large and heavy, but Katsuki heaves it over his shoulder, wrapping his hand around the wrist to help keep him place as he bobs their heads above the water. He doesn't need to breathe the air like this, but he's pretty sure humans do. There's a sick lull in the way the human's head drops to the side, but Katsuki grits his teeth and swims as hard as he can for the shoreline.

Despite the buoyancy of the water, the human's heavy. He's easily double Katsuki's size by the feel of him threatening to sink them both. Still, this human made the effort to save him and Katsuki isn't about to give up on them. His fins and arms ache fiercely as he swims them away from the chaos of the boat with the painful orange waves, his hand raw and bloodied as it pushes through the water.

Soon enough, the sounds of the sinking ship are far behind them and the water begins to warm as the sea ledge creeps up below them. Katsuki's never been this close to shore, something his mother will surely beat him for, but getting the human to safe ground is his priority. She'll get over it.

Sand rubs against his fins, gritty and cool as he drags both himself and the human to lay across the sand. Once the human's mostly out of the water, Katsuki collapses on his back next to him, his body practically shaking from the strain of having done so. It's quiet, save for Katsuki's labored breath and the sounds of the waves licking along the shoreline, tickling the edge of his fin and gently washing over the human's...feet? Legs?

Katsuki strains his brain trying to remember what they're called, before deeming it stupid information to begin with. Who cares what they're called? Why should he worry about names when he's literally right next to a human and can actually *look at them*. Forgetting his sore body, Katsuki shifts until he's sitting up, leaning over the human.

He's *nervous*.

His chest tightens and for a moment, all he can do is stare. Water darkened hair presses wet and sticky across the human's forehead, its eyes are closed and its lips are parted ever so slightly. With shaking fingers, Katsuki reaches out and lets

his fingers hover just about the human's mouth, sighing out his own breath of relief when he can feel the warm air moving past the human's lips.

He's alive. He's safe.

Pride swells in Katsuki's belly as he grins down at the human, pleased beyond measure that he's accomplished his goal; the favor returned. Taking back his hand, Katsuki reaches up to touch his own lips, wondering briefly if the human's would be just as soft. They look as if they might. The human's bottom lip is plump and dotted with water that seems to glisten under the moonlight. It's distracting.

Shaking his head to rid himself of his trance, Katsuki takes in the rest of the human, allowing himself free range to admire and examine. His clothing is tattered, just fabric covering most of his lower half, his chest bare. It's mesmerizing to watch the rise and fall of the human's chest which is so much broader than his own. He feels as if he's under a spell, his eyes unable to look anywhere else that isn't on his human. His eyes wander down long arms to large webless hands, and back up until he's back to staring at the human's hair.

A small trickle of red catches his attention and without thinking, Katsuki reaches out to touch his fingers to the bleeding skin. Using his fingers, he gently prods the area, feeling for the gash. Katsuki uses his other hand to push back the red silky hair until he can see the cut under the light of the moon. Relief washes over him again. The wound doesn't appear to be a large one, and though Katsuki has little knowledge of human anatomy save for what lore his mother knows, he has no doubts about the human's chances of survival. Still, maybe he should look just one more time? Reaching out, he touches his fingers to the gash again and nearly flips out of his fins when the body under him stirs with a gasp.

"Ouch!" the human says, wincing.

Katsuki shoots back quickly, eyes wide with panic as red ones blink slowly back up at him.

"Ah. It's you." The human's lips tilt upward at the corners, giving Katsuki a small smile. "I saved you. Nice."

Unable to help himself, Katsuki scoffs. "I saved *you*, actually," he replies before slamming a hand over his mouth.

What's *he doing*? Talking to a human?! Maybe *he's* the one who actually hit his head. Maybe this is all some sort of fever dream.

"Really?" the human returns, looking impressed as his eyes search Katsuki's face. "A pretty little thing like you? I'm one lucky guy."

No one has ever called Katsuki pretty before. His face blushes scarlet at the unexpected compliment, forcing him to look away.

"Sorry," the human giggles, "I don't know why I am saying such forward things. Forgive me, please?"

A cold touch makes Katsuki gasp and his eyes widen to see his injured hand being engulfed by one of the human's larger ones. Frozen, Katsuki watches, daring not to even breathe as his hand is brought up to full, soft looking lips and a gentle kiss is placed onto the back of his hand. "Please?" the human asks again, his eyes catching Katsuki's. It's those eyes paired with the kiss that makes Katsuki ready to either throw himself into the human's arms or swim away as fast as he can. Instead he chooses to simply nod, forgetting what he's even supposed to be agreeing to. The human smiles, pleased. He gives Katsuki's fingers a soft squeeze, which is surely meant to be a sweet gesture, but it makes Katsuki cry out from the momentarily forgotten pain. Now that the adrenaline has died, his hand is in absolute agony.

Taking it out of the human's grip, Katsuki examines it. The entirety of his palm is angry red. Small bubbles formed over most of his palm, some parts open and raw, and even the cool breeze hitting his skin feels terrible. Shifting next to him, the human moves to sit up but immediately falls back to the sand. "Dizzy," he groans weakly as he closes his eyes. He lays there for less than a second before he sucks in a huge breath and then forces himself up.

"Lay back down!" Katsuki commands. "You're injured."

The human whimpers, looking up at him through narrowed eyes. "So are you. Let me take care of you."

Katsuki rolls his eyes.

The human's hand is moving back towards him, slower this time and Katsuki knows he shouldn't, but he lets the human grab it anyway. He's very gentle, squinting at it with one eye as he uses his thumb to ever so softly brush against the painful marks.

"Your fingers are strange."

Katsuki freezes as the human's thumb brushes up against the webbed area between his thumb and index finger almost curiously. Trying to take his hand back, Katsuki glares at his stupid hands, wishing they could be beautiful and delicate looking like the human's. The human stops him, moving his hand down to Katsuki's uninjured wrist and holding him in place.

"I like them," he says simply. Just like his previous touches, the human is slow to move Katsuki's hand back towards his mouth where he presses another soft kiss, this time to his tattered palm. "I'm sorry that you got hurt. What happened?"

Blinking in disbelief, Katsuki wonders for a second time if he's the one who actually hit his head. After all, according to his mother all humans are soulless evil beings and yet, this human not only attempted to save his life, but just kissed his hand. Twice. Compelled to prove his mother even more wrong, Katsuki tries to shake off his embarrassment and decides to answer.

"The orange waves," he tells the human who is still holding his hand. "I'd never seen them before and I made the mistake of touching one. It was...hot."

The human narrows his eyes, in an apparent attempt to think because he winces when he does. "Orange waves?" he says, frowning slightly then he gasps, "Oh! You mean fire, right?" The human attempts to sit up again, which of course gets him to fall back over. "Ugh. My head hurts," he complains. "But I want to look at you."

*Are humans always prone to saying such embarrassing things?*

Katsuki scowls through his blush, taking his hand back out of the human's grip and pressing it to his chest. "Lay down. I told you, you're injured. You need rest."

The human pouts, stubbornly lifting his head slightly in an attempt to make eye contact. It's alarmingly cute.

Looking away, Katsuki happens to spot a large piece of driftwood within arm's reach that looks like it could make a decent prop for the human's head. "Stay still," Katsuki demands before stretching as far as he can for the log. Thankfully, the tips of his fingers are able to wiggle the wood closer and with his uninjured hand, Katsuki's able to grab it. Gently, he slides his hand under the human's head, watching carefully for signs of pain as he lifts him in order to slide the wood under him. The human grits his teeth, but doesn't complain.

"Better?" Katsuki asks once he gets the human situated.

"Yes, thank you. For this, and for saving me. I'd like to make it up to you."

Katsuki waves him off. "Don't worry about it, it's not like you'll ever see me again."

The human frowns at that. "And why not?"

It takes everything in him for Katsuki not to bitterly laugh out loud. For one, his mother's going to flay him alive as soon as he sets fin anywhere near the castle and probably have him locked up for the rest of his natural life. Secondly, there's the whole not being human thing that doesn't exactly work in his favor.

"I'm not from here," Katsuki says, understating his situation but not lying.

The human looks around, and then gives Katsuki a grin. "Neither am I." Quickly his smile fades, and worry furrows his brows. "Or am I? I'm actually not too sure..."

Once, when he was a child, Katsuki and Izuku had been playing together in an older section of the castle that was in the process of being remodeled. They weren't supposed to be there, a rule they had both chosen to ignore and made a game of hiding in between the tools the royal builders had left behind for the day. All was going well, until without realizing it, Katsuki had swam too fast and turned too late, crashing into a large stack of collected rock meant to be used for the remodel. One by one the rocks fell, and Katsuki, unable to dodge in time, was struck. According to his mother and Izuku, who still cries about the accident to this day, he's lucky the rock only grazed him. Still, he had been knocked unconscious and when he awoke, Katsuki couldn't remember his own name for some time. It was a terrifying experience that had never left him.

Thinking back to his own head injury, Katsuki decides to imitate what the royal

healers had done for him.

"What do you remember?" Katsuki asks, trying to keep his voice calm.

"You," the human says, his nose scrunching as he sorts through memories. "No wait. There was... a party. Yeah, a party."

"And what was the party for?"

"Hmm..." The human bites at his lip, closing his eyes. Almost as soon as he closed them, they snap open. "Oh! It was for me! It was... my birthday party, I think? At least I think so because I remember fireworks and we only light those o—the fireworks!" The human tries to sit up, but Katsuki's quick to press a hand to his chest to hold him down. "My crew!" the human yells. "There was a fire! I remember the fire!" He moves to sit back up again and Katsuki has to use more force to keep him down, using even his injured hand as the human man struggles against him.

"Calm down!" Katsuki hisses. "You're inju—"

"Who cares about me!" the human snaps, cutting Katsuki off sharply despite his eyes welling up with tears. "What about *them*? *My crew*? What happened? You were there, is everyone else safe? I just remember helping to put out the fire and then... I saw you! I saw you in the water and jumped after you!"

The human's clearly distressed and Katsuki mentally flogs himself for being the cause. As gently as he can, he reaches out to soothingly pat at his hair, something his mother used to do when he was smaller and had nightmares. It's probably insane, touching a human like this but he can't help himself from wanting to soothe him. "Shh, shh," Katsuki shushes him as he runs his fingers through the human's damp hair. "I'm sure everyone is fine."

He isn't, but he's not about to tell the human that.

"Please," the human whispered, looking up at him with watery eyes. "Tell me they're alright."

Automatically, Katsuki obliges. "They're fine..." he starts, then trails off, pausing, wanting to use the human's name and realizing he doesn't know it.

"Why'd you say it like *that* then?"

"I didn't say it in *any* type of way!"

The human stares at him, unconvinced.

With a sigh, Katsuki removes his hand from the human's hair and sits up a little straighter. He looks back down at the human, watches as a tear rolls down his cheek. "What's your name?"

The human snorts. "Really? You work on my crew but don't know me?"

"I don't work for you," Katsuki retorts, incredulous. Him work for anyone? Much less a human? Ridiculous.



"Oh?" The human says, one of his eyebrows raising. "A stowaway then? I'm sure Mina will be thrilled to know someone was able to slip past her. But, maybe if you tell me *your* name I won't tell her."

"And why the hell should I care about this 'Mina' person? Like it matters."

"It should matter," the human says with a smirk. "Considering she is head of the royal guard and kind of in charge of the entire kingdom." The human finishes the last part with a small chuckle, like there is some sort of inside joke Katsuki isn't a part of. It irritates him to think of the human and this 'Mina' having private jokes together.

"Where I come from the royal family is in charge of the kingdom, not some guard. How weak are your royals?" Katsuki challenges, puffing up his own chest pridefully.

The human is suddenly quiet, eyes moving from Katsuki back to the ocean.

"Very weak," he says after a moment, eyes still trained on the gentle waves. "Too weak to protect his crew..." The human closes his eyes, sniffing just a bit and Katsuki can see the corners of his eyes begin to leak. "Why'd you save me? You should have just left me out there with them. You should have left me to drown. It's what I deserve."

"You saved me first, idiot. What? Like I was going to let you die after that? Please. But if I knew you were going to be this whiny about it, maybe I should have."

The human gasps, opening his eyes as he stares at Katsuki in shock.

"What?" Katsuki asks. "You're the one being dramatic. You don't know if anyone is even dead and you are sniveling like a child."

"How dare you!" the human snaps, jerking away from him but immediately groaning from the movement.

"C'mon now, don't hurt yourself princess," Katsuki murmurs, leaning back over to press a hand to the human's forehead. "Lay down and be still. Look, I'm not trying to be cruel. Just... My mother always told me that you have to be strong, *especially when you don't want to*. That there is a time and place for weakness, and right now? This isn't the time. Or the place. You can't worry about things that you don't even know are happening. Do you trust your crew?"

"Yes."

"Do you trust they can take care of themselves?"

"...Yes."

"Then that's what you need to focus on. Trust they're alright, and stay strong for them. What do you think they'll respect you more for? You just laying around crying, or you doing what you need to get back to them?"

The human stares at Katsuki, a small grin upturning the side of his lips. "You've got a smart mother," he finally says, wiping at his eyes.

"Yeah well, she kinda has to be. Queens usually are."

The human scrunches his face at Katsuki. "What did you say?"

Puzzled, Katsuki frowns, scratching at his chin absentmindedly. "About what? My mom being smart? She's basically the worst, but she isn't stupid." He gives the human a longer look, then backpedals. "Well, about most things at least."

"No no no," the human says, waving his hand. "About her being a queen."

"What about it?"

"My mom is the Queen, or rather she was before you know... Anyway, where the hell did you say you're from again? How does a stowaway have royal blood?" The human's squinting his eyes at Katsuki, and it's kind of adorable, which he definitely shouldn't be thinking of at this moment. But he's already broken about every single one of his mother's anti-human rules, so why not add "thinking the human is cute" to that list.

"Whatever a stowaway is, that isn't what I am," Katsuki says, sticking his nose up in the air. "But you better believe I have royal blood, after all, I *am* a prince and I hate to break it to you, but your mom apparently isn't the only queen around, Prince...?"

"Eijiro. I'm Prince Eijiro Kirishima."

"You don't look much like a prince Eijiro," Katsuki says, pulling at a piece of the ruined cloth that still somehow clung wetly to his large torso. "And you definitely don't swim like one." Katsuki has to fight back a chuckle as he remembers how the human, Eijiro, tried to swim them both to safety. He looked like a fish out of water, and in a way, he almost was.

"That's thick coming from the person who stuck his hand in fire, but please, continue to bully me, a probably concussed person."

Eijiro has a sharp tongue, and Katsuki finds himself leaning forward, enjoying himself more than ever. "Not only am I a terrific swimmer, but a bully as well? Damn, I really can do it all."

"Everything except give me your name," Eijiro counters. "Also, how *did* you manage to swim the both of us here? It may be hazy but I'm sure we were pretty far out and you are so *tiny* compared to me."

"I'm not *that* tiny," Katsuki snaps. "And obviously it's because I'm superior." Shifting away from him, Katsuki points with his good hand towards his fin, lifting it up and slapping it against Eijiro's legs for emphasis. "Plus, I'm clearly better equipped than you are."

Eijiro squeaks, his eyes bulging out of his skull as he looks from Katsuki's fin back to his face, repeating the process until finally he closes his eyes. "Well, that's it, I guess I've officially gone insane."

"Huh?" Katsuki asks, confused.

With his eyes still closed, Eijiro sighs. "Or maybe I did hit my head a little too hard because clearly, I am hallucinating. Or maybe this is all a dream." Pinching himself enough to gasp, Eijiro lets out a defeated sigh when he peeks at Katsuki from under his eyelashes after. "Nope. Crazy it is."

"You aren't crazy, stop being stupid."

"Yeah uh-huh. Like me getting rescued by a beautiful mythical creature is completely normal and not at all insane. Sure. Listen here fish boy, wake me up if rescuers happen to come."

Choosing not to comment on the bit about him being beautiful, Katsuki hides his blush in lieu of giving Eijiro a shake. "I'm pretty sure someone who hit their head that hard isn't allowed to sleep Eijiro, so maybe don't do that."

"You're my hallucination, so aren't I supposed to be calling the shots?"

God, his human is so stubborn. Ignoring him by looking out onto the sea, Katsuki notes how the darkness of the sky is beginning to lighten, the stars slowly fading into the dark black blue of the sky. Soon, that same sky will be brilliant shades of pinks and oranges, fat white clouds streaking the sky as the sun makes it way up into the sky. And when that happens, Katsuki will leave, slipping back into the cold depths of the dark ocean; his time on the surface just a memory. His time with Eijiro up.

There's a lump forming in his throat, and he feels something wet on his face.

"Hey," Eijiro says in a softer voice. "Are you crying?"

Lifting his good hand up to his face, Katsuki presses his fingers against his skin and feels the wetness that gathered there. In the ocean, no one can cry. At least not in any way that someone could feel or see. It's novel to be doing so here on the surface, and if not for the ache in his heart, he may even been happy about it. "I guess I am," Katsuki hums, staring down at the water on his fingertip. "When you think about it, crying, it's kind of like you humans have a whole ocean inside of you, huh?"

"Why are you crying?" Eijiro asks instead.

"I'm not sure," Katsuki whispers. Taking his eyes back from the sea, he turns to look at Eijiro. "This means I'm sad though, right?"

Eijiro frowns. "Sometimes it can be because you're really happy. Sometimes it's both."

Thinking about it, he really is conflicted. Most of him is happy, living out his dream to be on the surface, being with a human. But the other part of him fills with a deep longing, knowing that this life isn't meant for him. And it isn't just about the human part, being able to do as they do, not anymore. He knows that after this fleeting night, he's never going to see Eijiro again either. He's never getting this chance to be with him again.

But still, he's so happy being here, even though the pain of leaving it all, leaving this human, will hurt even more so. It's one thing to imagine it, and an entirely different thing to be doing it. Finally, Katsuki nods. "Then I'm both. I'm feeling both right now."

Slowly, Eijiro reaches out and takes Katsuki's good hand in between his own, giving it a small squeeze. "Then go ahead and cry if you want to," he encourages.

It's as if a dam breaks loose inside Katsuki. Fat tears drip silently down his face, with no signs of stopping and all the while Eijiro sits next to him, holding his hand as he cries it out, the two of them watching as the sky continues to lighten while the waves loll gently across the shore.

Eventually, the tears do let up, and Katsuki's snuffle breaks the silence. Eijiro takes his hand back and reaches out to Katsuki's face, wiping away the last of his tears with his thumb. "Feel better?" he asks.

"Sorta, but not really," Katsuki admits with a sigh.

"You want to talk about it?"

Despite never wanting to talk about his feelings before, Katsuki strangely finds himself having to stop from nodding. "I don't really know what to say though. Or how to explain it to you. Besides it's your fault I feel this way. It's messing with my head."

"Wait," Eijiro questions, "How is you crying *my* fault?!"

"Well, dumbass," Katsuki quips, flicking Eijiro on the nose. "If it wasn't for you, I'd never have gone up to the surface and never would have had to find out that humans actually aren't bad."

"Who says we're bad?!"

"Uh, everyone?" Katsuki says, looking at Eijiro like he's stupid. "Humans only want one thing: to kill us. At least, that's just what my mom says."

"It's the other way around, you sirens just want to lure us to our deaths in the ocean. WAIT! Is that how my ship crashed? Did you do that?!" Eijiro's face goes pale as he stares at Katsuki in horror. Katsuki has half a mind to slap him.

"I was too tiny to support your fat ass to shore, but now you think I can take down a whole boat? You're absurd. But no, to answer your question I did *not* do that. Also, what the hell is a siren?"

"A half fish, half woman who sings sailors to their death?" Eijiro squeaks.

"One, my voice is terrible and two, do I *look* like a woman to you?"

"...No," Eijiro admits.

"Well, there you go then," Katsuki snorts.

"Is it rude of me to ask what you are then?"

Katsuki shrugs. "Guess not. I'm merfolk, or rather a merman if you want to be specific. Any other questions now that you've apparently decided I am not a hallucination?"

"I haven't decided that you're real yet," Eijiro chuckles. "But I might as well indulge in my fantasy while I still can before I wake up in a straight-jacket."

"A fantasy huh? Even humans can be weird," Katsuki grins, pleased when Eijiro's face turns a shade of scarlet.

"Not like that!" Eijiro whines. "Anyway," he says, clearly trying to change the subject. "You said you're a prince?"

"Yup. Prince Katsuki Bakugou, son of Mitsuki and Masaru of Atlantis."

"Sounds like a big deal... Also, uhh... I like your name."

"Thank...you?" Katsuki says, squinting at the compliment. "Yours is okay too, I guess."

Eijiro grins, "Look at us, two princes, two different worlds. Kinda neat."

"We're from the same world, dumbass. Mine's just... wetter."

It's nice to hear Eijiro laugh, but it's easy to spot the strain it causes when he's clutching at his head after.

"Hey, maybe you should close your eyes," Katsuki suggests. "The sun is about to rise and surely someone will be coming to find you. I should leave you."

Eijiro's almost frantic when he clutches at Katsuki's hand. "Don't leave! I mean... if you want to, I can't uhh really stop you. But I'd like it if you didn't. I want to spend more time with you. So will you, you know? Stay with me?"

Giving him a soft smile, Katsuki agrees, looking down at his hand wrapped in Eijiro's. "Just until the sunrise, okay? Then I have to go." In all honesty he should have left hours ago, but leaving Eijiro seems a heavy task and he isn't prepared for the weight of it. Not yet. "Got any more questions? After all, you did say I'm a mythical creature," Katsuki teases.

"Are all... uhh... Merfolk, like you?" he asks.

"What do you mean?"

Tentatively Eijiro shifts as much as he can and his other hand touches Katsuki's face gently, before moving to stroke a few soft pats against his fins that are just starting to shimmer ever so slightly under the lightening sky. Katsuki shivers under his slow explorations.

"Are you all so pretty or is that just a Katsuki thing?"

Katsuki feels like he could die. "W-W-WHAT?!" he sputters. "I—You can't just say *that!*"



"And yet?" Eijiro smirks. "I just did. So Katsuki, are you gonna tell me or not?"

Looking away, Katsuki tries to hide his furious blush. "You really did hit your head pretty damn hard if you can think such ridiculous things."

"I just have eyes, Katsuki," Eijiro laughs.

"Shut up or die."

Eijiro's still laughing and when Katsuki moves to throw sand in his face he stops. The early morning sun is just beginning to rise over the ocean, its rays landing upon Eijiro's face in a way that makes him look ethereal under the golden glow. Eijiro accuses Katsuki of being beautiful, but really, it's the other way around. Nothing, not his collection, not the entire ocean or even the entire world can compare to the beauty that is Prince Eijiro Kirishima in this moment. And this view, this human, is all his just for a little while longer.

Eijiro opens his eyes at this moment, meeting Katsuki's stare. Before he realizes it's happening, Katsuki's hand seems to stretch out on its own accord to cup Eijiro's face in his hand. "Close your eyes Eijiro," Katsuki asks of him softly.

Compliant, Eijiro licks his lips before letting out a shaky breath. His eyes close and Katsuki's hand moves from his face down to his chest, leaving it there once he reaches the hard expanse of Eijiro's abdomen and leans over him. Slowly, ever so slowly Katsuki leans forward until he's a breath away from Eijiro's lips. The hand on Eijiro's belly trembles, his other hurting so badly from the fist Katsuki makes. But he pushes past his nerves, sucking in a deep breath before pushing himself to close the distance. Just as his lips are barely touching Eijiro's, a yell sends him reeling and falling backwards onto his hands to move away. He winces at the pain, quickly bringing his damaged hand up to his chest.

"EIJII! EIJI WHERE ARE YOU?!"

It's a woman's voice, faint, but steadily growing louder.

"It's Mina!" Eijiro gasps, smiling huge as the voice calls out again. "She's alive!"

Katsuki smiles softly, and gives Eijiro a nod. "Told you, worried for nothing."

Eijiro grins, attempting to sit up, but Katsuki rushes back to push him against the log. "Stay you idiot, you're still hurt. Anyway, that's my cue. Goodbye—"

"No!" Eijiro says, cutting him off. "Stay and meet her! She's great and she can totally help with your hand too."

"Eijiro," Katsuki says, seriously. "I can't. Humans and merfolk... we... I just can't."

"Come back then," Eijiro says, grabbing for Katsuki's wrist. "Meet me again. Here, tomorrow."

"I can't..."

"Please Katsuki. I don't... I don't want you to not be real. I want to see you again."

His eyes are so big and pleading, refusing him doesn't seem possible.

Resigned, Katsuki sighs. "Fine, okay. I'll try."

"Perfect, I already can't wait." And just as he lets go of Katsuki's wrist, Eijiro surges forward and pressed his lips to Katsuki's cheek. "Tomorrow. You promise?"

"EIJIRO KIRISHIMA WHERE ARE YOU?" the woman, Mina, starts yelling again.

"I promise," Katsuki whispers, his face blazing and heart thumping wildly in his chest as Eijiro smiles at him.

Hearing footsteps, Katsuki quickly moves to make his retreat back into the sea just in time to look back and see a woman with brightly colored pink hair shrieking and throwing herself onto Eijiro in what seems to be a crying mess. He might have been mad if not for seeing Eijiro peek from around her to give Katsuki another grin and a thumbs up. Katsuki gives a small wave before letting himself sink under the waves, already sad to be leaving Eijiro.

Touching his hand to his cheek, the same spot that Eijiro had kissed, Katsuki smiles, remembering the warmth.

Tomorrow.

He's going to see Eijiro tomorrow and nothing will stop him.















# A Girl Worth Fighting

A *Mulan* AU by Estelle in collaboration with Phish (left)

Ochaco looks down at the bowl in her lap, warm and full of congee. It's topped with two eggs and a strip of bacon, resembling a face that smiled up at her as Iida begins his morning lecture, recounting the tasks for today on his claws. She can hear the occasional chirp of birds from outside her tent, which has been her make-shift room for the past weeks.

Life here is drastically different from what Ochaco was used to—the days of reciting lines and practising manners are far behind her—but she has to admit that she's proud of her progress since joining. It took tons of extra training and late nights, but as of now, Ochaco can confidently say that she's as skilled as any other soldier in their camp.

This achievement is not to be credited to her alone, however. Midoriya has been a huge help, but Ochaco shouldn't be surprised about that. Since their childhood they've played with wooden swords and ran around in imitation of soldiers, and as they grew he took to following in the footsteps of their country's heroes—or to be more specific, All Might, a warrior that once saved an entire village from destruction with minimal casualties and troops behind him.

Ochaco's dream had been to simply do her family proud and support them as best as she could (it even led to a hobby of making crafts and pastries to sell for a side-income) but if she had to be honest, every time Midoriya went on a tangent about his goals she felt a bit of longing herself. It sounded amazing to be able to protect others with your own power and skill.

Power and skill... Something that women were not supposed to wield as freely as men, in their society. She had never minded it as much until conscription was announced. The Huns have breached their borders, they said. Each family would have the honour and responsibility to serve.

But her father was weakened from illness. There was no way he would make it. Just what kind of justification would 'honour' be if it meant the loss of a life?

Not soon after the officials departed, Ochaco tried to talk her father out of it: He would only drag the others down in his state. He was too old for this. *He wouldn't return if he left.*

All her arguments were quickly shot down. He would go. He would fulfil his role as the man of the family.

*Then what about your role as a father?* She had miserably thought. *What would we do if you were gone...*

There was only one way to prevent him from going. Ochaco knew what she had to do. That night she steeled her resolve, love for her family burning bright as she stealthily took the conscription document and made off with her father's armour. She prayed to her ancestors excessively that night; for them to protect her family, to help her succeed, and to forgive her for failing at her role of a daughter.

She reached up to touch her bun at the thought. With her action of slicing off her hair she had submitted herself to her choice. There'd been no going back from that.

On the same night Ochaco took a detour to Midoriya's home. They had made plans of sending him off the next morning with a good memory, but she wouldn't be around by then. Instead, she wrote a short note to leave outside his room, saying sorry and that they might see each other soon.

He was properly shocked when he saw her lining up with the others on the first day. His dumbfounded look was quickly replaced with that of worry as he took an opportunity to pull her aside.

Ochaco explained everything, ending with a determined look towards him. "*Are you going to stop me?*" She had asked. Her voice sounded confident then, but her eyes had held a different message. *Please don't, they said. Please let me do this.*

Whether it was because the words reached him or that he was more concerned for her safety, Midoriya agreed. From there he took to helping her build up her physical ability and endurance. After some time it became obvious that her strengths lied in speed and agility (which perhaps stemmed from her smaller build and dance lessons in the past).

"...And don't forget your formalities or who the captain is. Hard-headed he may be, Bakugou is a well-respected figure, so—"

"Good morning!" Midoriya chimes from outside their tent. "Are you decent?"

Iida huffs a little, crossing his arms. "Of course she is! I haven't let her oversleep *once*."

At that, Midoriya lifts open the tent's flap. He smiles at the dragon. "I'm glad she's had you to rely on."

Iida's dark blue scales seem to shine brighter under the light. His chest puffs out proudly as he steps away from the opening to give Midoriya room. "I'm a family guardian, after all."

"Deku!" Ochaco greets, standing up. She's done with her breakfast and is already geared up for the day. "Thanks for coming to get me."

Tsuyu chirps her own hello. The jade cricket leaps up to land on her shoulder as they make their way to the main area. They're meters away but can already feel tension oozing from the scene. Midoriya frowns, trying to listen for the usual chatter of soldiers, but there's none.

Dread starts to build in her chest. Ochaco wonders what's happened—could it be that a fight broke out? Is Bakugou in a bad mood?

The answer is a combination of both. Ochaco and Midoriya arrive and soundlessly tread their way towards their friends. Kaminari, Kirishima and Sero are standing off to the side, eyes reflecting sympathy and hints of amusement.

"What's going on?" She whispered to Sero, who was nearest to her.

"The general caught them pushing over a bunch of weapons. They were arguing about something, apparently."

It was similar to what happened at the start of their training, where she was the prompt of an all-out brawl within their peers: Another recruit had accidentally knocked her over and continued to mock her for being light enough to fall. Midoriya called him out for his attitude, which grabbed the others' attention, who at the time were merely strangers.

Kirishima stood up against the man's unjust behaviour and it turned into a fight as a punch was thrown his way in reply. Kaminari and Sero had made to help their friend, and the camp was soon thrashed as people fought their way into the carts of rice and supplies.

Bakugou's wrath was terrifying that day. His punishment to pick up every grain of rice and run laps around the camp was grueling. But from that experience came the start of Ochaco and Midoriya's newfound friendships with Kirishima, Sero and Kaminari, who had fought in defence of her in the situation.

But for some reason, Bakugou looked much more frightening right now than before. As if he just recalled the same incident, he throws a look at Ochaco when he notices her arrival. It can only be described as a blend of critique and irritation, like: 'This is your fault. You set a bad example for the others, and look where that got us now.'

She thinks the accusation to be a completely senseless one, but keeps her mouth shut and expression neutral.

A punishment, threat, and paralysing look of contempt later, they're ordered to pack up and depart camp. The real war now began as they made their way to the village where All Might's forces were stationed.

The journey there is a long and tedious one, which means that the soldiers began to converse among themselves (not too loudly, though, in fear of Bakugou's fury.)

"I still can't believe you bashed that stone in on the first try," Kaminari was saying as he shook his head, "Even Bakugou was impressed."

"Didn't he just go 'not bad, Shitty Hair'?" Ochaco's impression isn't all that accurate, but she laughs despite herself. "Sometimes I wonder if he can ever give a straight compliment. Though he *has* been nicer to you since, Kirishima."

The red-head grins proudly. "I still remember training at home with weights. Even if we didn't have a war to fight for, I think I would've still tried becoming a warrior."

"I can definitely picture that," Sero nods. "You're crazy athletic."

"Says the guy who caught like, ten fish with his bare hands." Kaminari makes a grabbing gesture at the memory. "What are they made of, tape?"

"I'm just used to handing seafood," he shrugs, before pointing towards Ochaco. "And Uraraka was the one that climbed up the huge pole, shouldn't you be saying that to him? It was nuts."

"I guess I did." A pleased blush dusts her cheeks. "Bakugou told me to go home when we were just a week in, so I had to do *something*. What kind of man would I be otherwise?"

At the last bit she nudges Midoriya playfully, who rolls his eyes at the joke. He's smiling, though, which gives her a boost of energy.

"It was very manly," Kirishima says approvingly. "The way you waved at him from the top? I'll remember that sight forever."

"It's thanks to you, Deku." Ochaco shifts the attention to him. "You were the one to give me the idea for how to use the weights."

"Oh... That was nothing."

"What a liar," she huffs playfully. "Without your help I wouldn't have made it this far."

"You guys are long-time friends, right?" Sero asks as they march along, their surroundings melting into that of rice fields and cows.

The conversation carries on, and Ochaco is reminded of their childhood as the others settle into the topic. She recalls how her father taught her to wield a sword after much prodding from her and Midoriya. They'd only been... What, six at the time? From there they were allowed to play around with wooden staffs as they practised with her father, the image of armoured soldiers lingering in their minds as they imagined themselves fighting for glory.

It was fun, she fondly recalls. She supposes she has to thank Midoriya's interest in all things warrior-like, from strategic board games to combat exercises and trap-weaving. It's certainly helped in the long run.

Her boyish tendencies rubbed the matchmaker in the wrong way, though. During her assessment, the woman commented that the mere fact she still practiced and sparred with Midoriya took away her worth as a bride. (To that, her grandmother said she could suck it.)

She didn't mind, however. It wasn't like she was looking to appeal to men or the matchmaker anyways. Though the woman did give Ochaco a stingy compliment, saying that she wasn't too bad of a dancer. Though now from her time in training,



she's starting to realize that her light-footedness was lending well to her agility. Paired with her now-polished reflexes, Ochaco could even hold her own against Bakugou.

She glances over to Midoriya, who was rubbing the back of his neck sheepishly as he's met with praise for his tactics in one of their previous exercises. They slap him on the back as they laughed, to which Ochaco winces inwardly as she imagined being hit with the same force. Midoriya receives it fairly well, however, and says something that makes the entire group laugh.

*Boys will be boys*, she thinks fondly. Though the knowledge that she fit in better here rather than with the other ladies causes her to cringe slightly. *Right... I never did get a chance to apologise...*

Her thoughts (as well as the chatter) seizes as they come to a stop. The sudden silence turns heavy as some people's faces pale. From their place around the back, their group steps out for a closer look, only to freeze from the sight.

The village had been attacked.

Empty and torn apart, with no one in sight. What once might have been a home for many is now nothing more than a tattered, scorched mess. The scent of smoke still lingers as it twists in the air. The cold atmosphere sets dread in her heart. Even the clouds seem darker than before.

"...Search for survivors." Bakugou's voice rings out, clear and steady. He doesn't make another order, instead stepping out to start.

Solemnly, they spread out to check what was left of the buildings and land. It was only when Ochaco got past the main village that she sees the echo of a battlefield, ground stained with copper and littered with fallen swords and helmets.

"That's weird," Midoriya observes in a mutter. "It's just armor and weapons left-over..."

"Captain," Kaminari calls out to Bakugou, voice heavy. "I found this."

The sight of the item makes Ochaco's stomach lurch. She feels pressure build in her chest as thoughts begin to plague her. *No way...*

Bakugou clenches his jaw, reaching out to take the helmet from him. It had an unmistakable gold, red and blue design, marked with the name Yagi Toshinori.



"Are you alright?" Ochaco asks Midoriya quietly. They'd moved on from the trodden village towards the capital, seeing that it's where their enemies are likely to head next.

He sends a weak smile her way. "I am." The answer doesn't convince her, though, so he continues. "I mean, just because his helmet was found doesn't mean he's

dead or anything... He could've made it out." *He has to have made it out*, his expression says.

Ochaco knows best that this would hit especially hard for Midoriya. Throughout their childhood there was no other warrior that he admired as much as All Might.

Other than him, she's noticed that Bakugou held All Might in high regard as well. It's obvious if you paid attention to his reaction during the helmet's discovery, or when they received the summons to reinforce his group.

Truly, even if you weren't personally attached to All Might, the disappearance of him and his men would still land an impact. It's shown in the faces of many around her and is surely evident in her own expression as well.

The snow underneath Ochaco's feet seemed to thicken as they trudged along through the mountains. Bakugou signals for them to stay alert, only to be interrupted by the arrival of an arrow from above. It buries itself into the snow before him, serving as an introduction of what was to come.

Countless more follow, arcing in large, deadly curves before descending upon them like a cascade of thorns. The wave of flame-tipped arrows pursue them as they flee out of range, not without saving the cannons as they take cover behind the rocks.

The weapons are passed around, and one by one they aim and fire back at their opponents. The air is drowned in the booms and roars of battle, followed by strings of instructions from Bakugou.

With little to no ammunition left, they pause in their advances as silence befalls the snow-covered land. Ochaco can barely feel her fingertips at this point, but the adrenaline from being ambushed keeps her senses sharp and alert. There's not much to be heard over the howl of the wind, much less see from such a distance, until Ochaco starts to make out dark figures emerging far ahead of them.

Like the gathering of rain, their numbers increase from a drizzle to a pour. It quickly becomes obvious that their group is vastly outnumbered.

She looks around at her fellow soldiers; expressions a meld of bottled fear and grim determination. Some begin to draw their swords as they ready themselves for the fight to come.

Yet it is clearly a hopeless cause to face them head-on. Midoriya seems to have a similar thought as he turns to her, glancing towards the discarded matches at their feet. She warily pulls out her weapon to survey the area, before noticing a reflection in the blade of her sword.

Midoriya follows her gaze towards the tip of the cliffs above them, ladled and packed with snow. An understanding passes between them as he bends down and tosses her the last cannon, speaking urgently. "Go! You're the quickest on your feet!"

As if led by his words, Ochaco's body moves on its own as she races towards the

army ahead of them. It takes her a moment to realise what she has to do; *get as close as you can, aim, and fire.*

Iida grips onto her shoulders, yelling panickily. "What are you doing?!" Tsuyu chirps at him, to which his confusion only grows. "You're charging *towards* them?!"

"Just trust me," she manages to breathe out during her haste. With little distance left between her and her impending doom, Ochaco pats around her armour. "Crap—Where is it!"

"Where's what?!" Iida repeats loudly in frustration.

Ochaco shakes off her nerves and kneels to aim the cannon towards the cliff, while Iida urges her to hurry, arms chopping the air frantically. "Your idiotic friends are coming, though if you plan on doing something you better do it fast!"

"I am!" She finally twists around to grab a hold of Iida, placing him before the wick. "I need fire! Quick!" Glancing in front, it'd only take seconds before they reached her—

"Step back!" Iida warns before he releases a column of fire, lighting the cannon. Ochaco throws herself away, covering her ears.

The cannon bursts from the snow, flying towards the cliffs as she'd intended. Midoriya doesn't have time to commend her efforts, however, instead dragging her up and pulling her in the opposite direction. "We've gotta go!"

"That was ridiculous!" Iida barks at them. "Do you have any idea how—"

He's cut off by panicked cries from those around them, both allies and enemies as the triggered avalanche descends upon them.

"This might've been a terrible idea," she admits while running.

"It was the only one we had!" Midoriya distractedly replies, looking around for a faster way out. "Get on the horses!"

Ochaco looks to where he's pointing; the few mounts they'd brought were panicking, but two were in range if they ran fast enough.

They manage to get onto the horses moments before the snow overtakes them. Ochaco's body lurches from the force as her vision blurs. Shielding her face from the wind she guides the horse in hopes of retreating onto an elevated rock.

There's a cry of help from the distance before the rest descends into a blur—a moment later she spots Bakugou getting swept up by the snow and manages to pull him up to safety, then a cliff's end comes into view and they're riding desperately against the current to avoid falling—

Coming to their rescue is an arrow tied with a rope, which Ochaco barely manages to catch from horseback and quickly secure onto the saddle. Right as she feels herself begin to fall from getting swept off, the rope tightens and they're steadily pulled to safety. She takes deep breaths to calm her trembling hands and racing

heart before checking on Bakugou, who's now awake.

"You..." He holds his head, which Ochaco imagines is throbbing like hers is. "You're the craziest bastard I've ever met, Uraraka."

She barely manages to raise her head, but does meet his eyes. "Really?" She weakly tries to sound sarcastic.

"Yes," he seems to have gained his bearings now. "And for that, I owe you my life."

The surprise from his words helps to clear her head. It isn't like him to be this honest, but Ochaco lets herself accept the thanks, smiling slightly. "I'm just glad we're alive."

Upon knowing that they were alright, the others begin to shake off their shock and cheer into the air at their victory. Bakugou stands and makes to help her up, but as Ochaco raises herself a sharp pain slices through the area around her waist. She must've gotten injured while being tossed around during the avalanche.

Perhaps it's exhaustion that's catching up to her from the physical exertion, or maybe she's hit her head as well, but Ochaco soon finds her vision blurring, falling into unconsciousness despite her attempts to fight against it.



The first thing Ochaco hears is hushed whispering. No... Not hushed... Muffled. By the tent she was in. Why was she inside a tent? Last she remembered she was in the mountains, and there was an avalanche... Then Bakugou, cheering, and...

Her eyes fly open in panic, arm instinctively reaching towards her body to check; she was wounded. They had called for medics, which meant—

Bandages. Her shoulders slump as her hands meet the tough fabric. She registers the smell of ointment and rubbing alcohol. They know now.

Ochaco's entire body freezes at the realisation; they're going to kill her.

The flaps to the tent fly open. It's Bakugou. She numbly meets his gaze, readying herself for the outburst that is sure to come.

Instead he punctures her with a glare, it's filled with uncompromising anger, but what makes Ochaco flinch is the hint of betrayal behind them. She prepared herself for shouting and insults, but has a bad feeling that Bakugou's reaction would be much worse. Why wouldn't it? Not only did a girl manage to sneak into his training camp, but also save his life—it's easy to rationalise that she's schemed to do this all along.

As if reading her thoughts, Bakugou scowls deeper. "You're too stupid to be working for the Huns, so what was your reason?"

Ochaco bites her lip, trying to gather her voice. It's rough from just awakening. "I did it for my father."

He narrows his eyes but doesn't bother asking more. He puts his hand on the hilt of his sword, before releasing his grip with a scoff. "You're not worth it. Go home before I regret sparing your life." He then turns to leave. "My debt is repaid, from now on you're nothing to the army. Take your things and leave."

*He's sparing me?*

Before Ochaco could think to say more, Bakugou steps out, barking at the rest of the soldiers. "Move out! We're heading to the capital." She can see his silhouette turn its head to face another direction. "If you lot think you can get away with staying back to help her, I'll consider you deported from the army."

Without waiting for a reply, he marches away, leaving Ochaco to stand up, this time without pain.

Physical pain, that is. Her emotions are a mess.

With a throbbing heart, Ochaco puts on the outerwear laid at the corner of the tent (a plain design, without padding or armour like they would give a man. The difference sets even more aching in her chest). She tries to shrug off her thoughts and steps outside to be met with a chilling breeze. It's much colder than it was inside, but all that's going through her mind right now is to find Midoriya.

Only three others know of them as childhood friends. She desperately hopes that they didn't report him for aiding in treason.

Relief washes over her when she sees him. Midoriya is with them. His shoulders sag when he sees that she's alive and standing.

The troops are leaving, however, which causes him to hesitate between approaching or not.

'Go,' she mouths to him. 'I'll be fine.'

Reluctantly, he does, but not without pointing towards an alcove nearby. She gets the message and trudges her way there. Her body is lighter because of the lack of armour, but in place of that is the freezing temperatures of the mountain, which slow her down.

Finally making her way there, Ochaco stifles a surprised sob—*He managed to put this together...*

Her heart warms considerably as she takes in the sight of a sleeping bag and tethered horse waiting for her. The area is canopied by the rock formations above them, just enough to limit the fall of snow and block out the wind. Somehow it's this rather than the tense atmosphere before that triggers her tears from falling. Her body sags in exhaustion as she falls to her knees.

Fear, guilt, relief—She's such a mess right now, but Ochaco couldn't care less as she sobs and hugs into herself. It's a wonder that she's alive right now.

Iida's whiskers droop as he hangs his head. "I... Tensei wouldn't have let this happen... I'm sorry, Uraraka."



She snuffles slightly and takes a deep breath, trying to calm herself enough to speak. "It's not your fault. This was going to happen anyways," Ochaco gives him a weak smile. "I think you've done great as a guardian. If my ancestors don't promote you, I'll send a prayer myself to convince them."

He doesn't say anything in response, but at least his eyes are brighter now. "They thought it'd be a bad idea to send a rookie like me after you, but Tensei wasn't in the right condition to do so either... He was the one that vouched for me." A new resolve seeps into his tone. "Right. He believed in me, so I'll do my best to bring you back safely."

Before Ochaco can form a reply, Tsuyu lets out an urgent chirp from her position above the rocks. She's hopped up between the gaps of the makeshift canopy, seeing as it wasn't completely sealed off. Iida's face drops in alarm. "They're alive?"

Following his words, Ochaco feels dread build in place of her bundle of emotions. "Who?"

Iida climbs up to stand beside Tsuyu, confirming his next words. "The Huns."



The troops have a break to themselves before attending the evening celebration—lord knows where Katsuki's men have run off to by now. He received an invitation for tea just as he's entered the city. The message wasn't signed off by anyone in particular, but he could recognize the seal's pattern anywhere.

Making his way into the room and plopping down on the empty seat across Todoroki, Katsuki deftly picks up the teapot and fills the cups. He leans back, taking a moment to settle before casting the other captain a lazy look.

"How bad did your recruits suck?"

Todoroki lowers his cup to answer. "Pretty bad. But they're much better now."

He snorts. "Can't say it was much different for me. The hell were they thinking, taking one from every family? Some just aren't made for war."

The other captain fixes him with his blue-grey gaze. "But you had a warrior that saved the day, didn't you? Uraraka Ochaco." It's odd hearing the name from his mouth. "From what I heard, it would've been great to have kept her on."

Katsuki raises a skeptical brow. "Really?"

He refills their tea. "Yes."

"...You know our rules. We can't have a girl as a soldier."

"It doesn't matter if that soldier was female; she's a good warrior, right? It's not often you find ones that use their heads." His tone is patient, which only stirs Katsuki's temper.

"Of course I know that!" He snaps. "You think I'm that prejudiced? The problem is that it's against the law. If I kept her on and hid her from the others I'd be charged with treason!"

Todoroki fixes him with a look. "So you did consider it."

Katsuki's face starts to burn. The bastard is impossible to talk to, but he's right.

For a moment, Katsuki considered treason, and he'll scorn himself for it for the rest of his life. Who was he to think of betraying his mentors' trust? What would become of his family if he had gone through with it?

At the silence, Todoroki stares into his cup, speaking thoughtfully. "We could always appeal for a special case, you know. With the both of us, Eraserhead and All Might—"

"All Might's alive?"

A confused look crosses Todoroki's expression. "You haven't heard? They laid low when they realised the Huns were going to overwhelm them. There were a few injuries, but they made it out alive. They plan to regroup with Eraserhead's troops and make their way back later."

*Injured but confirmed to be alive.* That's better than missing-in-action, which was what Katsuki thought when they'd come up empty in their search. He lets out a relieved sigh, shaking his head. "We were a little busy, but that's good to know. I'll send him a message later."

Todoroki hums. "You seem distracted."

He feels a nerve twitch. "No shit, half-an-half." Katsuki looks into his tea, voice lower than before. "That idiot... Saying she did it to save her father..."

"Could it be you're hung up on Uraraka?"

He stands up to leave, putting on his cloak. "I'll see you at the celebration. Don't miss it since I'll be the one to rub a medal in your face."

Katsuki's hasty escape is an answer in itself. Todoroki continues to empty the pot—there wasn't much left anyways—before standing up and making his way outside the tea shop.

Decorations and lanterns were already hung up, with people chattering excitedly about the emperor's appearance later that night.

*Right,* Todoroki lifts his hood to hide his hair. *Time to speak to the council.*

If things went well, Uraraka would be allowed to officially join their ranks after all.



Now filled with a new purpose, Ochaco speeds through the city, following the flow of activity to where the other soldiers were marching towards the palace. She

guides her mount to where Bakugou is leading at the front, ignoring the annoyed mutters of passersby.

Unsurprisingly, things are harder now that she didn't look like a soldier, much less a man. She didn't want to ride through on a horse, but there wasn't much of another choice. The citizens didn't take her seriously when she'd asked where the troops were headed, writing her off as an overexcited girl. *Just wait until the festival*, they said. *You'll be able to congratulate and get to see them there.*

*Congratulate?* Ochaco almost scoffed. She came here to *warn* them!

"Bakugou!" The urgency in her voice catches his attention, but the stubborn captain barely spares a glance, moving forward.

She grits her teeth in frustration. Pulling on the reins and clicking her tongue, Ochaco skids to a stop before Bakugou, cutting him off at the front.

"What is it?" He finally says, meeting her eyes disinterestedly.

Ochaco doesn't care if the guy was holding a grudge, she raises herself tall and fixes him with a sharp gaze, as if trying to pierce the message into him. "The Huns aren't defeated. They survived the avalanche."

Her voice is muffled out by the chatter around them, but Bakugou hears the warning loud and clear. "Then how did you make it here?"

"I rode?" Ochaco avoids the question. He's referring to the horse, and who left one behind for her. Without it she wouldn't have been able to make it out without being spotted by the Huns.

He narrows his gaze but doesn't press further, knowing she didn't intend on revealing their identity. "Then you can ride *out* of my way too, right? You're blocking the road."

Sensing his dismissal, Ochaco can only hope he's taken her warning to heart. She turns her mount to move away and catches a glimpse of Midoriya and the others.

She's surprised that they weren't shunning or avoiding her; she *did* commit treason, after all. She'd betrayed their trust.

Instead Kirishima shoots her a discreet thumbs-up, while Midoriya mouths towards her: 'We'll keep an eye out.'

Uneasiness slightly relieved, Ochaco sends them a small smile before riding away, searching for a spot to tether her horse. Once they got into the palace walls, the only way for her to move around would be on foot. Bringing a mount in to maneuver about the crowds is a headache she didn't want to deal with.

Iida and Tsuyu are perched on her shoulders as she makes her way through the sea of people. The booms of fireworks being shot into the air sound around them. As they crackle and burst into a rain of colours the lion dances start weaving around the vicinity, with one trailing behind Bakugou as he climbs the grand stairs towards the Emperor. Following are the soldiers from their camp, who march on

with their heads high. The people below are celebrating them for saving the country, clapping and cheering and waving their flags.

Ochaco just manages to break through the crowd when gasps and panic ripple over the onlookers. It takes her a moment to realise what's happened: The lion mascot on the stairs was a group of Huns. They've managed to snatch their leader's sword from Bakugou and carry the emperor into the palace, shutting and locking the doors as a barrier.

A delighted cackle sounds from above them. It's a girl in messy buns. Her attire is childish, yet her gaze is anything but. Her yellow eyes carry a dangerous glint as she spins a pair of knives gleefully. She addresses them while treading by the edges of the roof, seemingly unaffected by the height. "Hello, China!" Her voice doesn't suit the situation at all; too playful and loud.

Ochaco thinks she hears Bakugou cursing from the palace doors. "Say thank you to your *heroes*, who've granted us such a convenient route into the city." She places a finger to her chin, spinning around thoughtfully. "The avalanche wasn't fun, though, so I'll give you props for that!"

"Who's that?" Iida observes from her shoulders, voice incredulous. "She doesn't seem stable."

Ochaco starts to climb the stairs by the doubles, rhythm in her steps as she runs. "She doesn't have to be sane for us to be a threat."

"Now come and get your little emperor back, boys!" The girl continues, flashing her blades and giving the crowd a grin. "Before we get *bored*."

Ochaco takes a moment to catch her breath, only to jump in surprise from a loud bang—It was stone on wood, or more specifically, the soldiers trying to break their way in by force, using a statue as a battering ram.

*That... probably won't work in time.* She thinks, scanning the building's exterior. *If only we had some way to climb...*

She pats around her body in search of something that could help, hands finally landing on the sash around her waist.

An idea forming, she runs towards the soldiers, whistling loudly to draw their attention. They pause from another ram, turning to look towards her.

"Come on! I've got an idea!" She calls, waving them over.

Midoriya is the first to let go of the statue, then Sero, Kirishima and Kaminari.

"...So that's it." Ochaco leans away from their group huddle, thankful for the combination of people. After infiltrating the palace by climbing up the columns outside, Midoriya suggests they disguise themselves as concubines to sneak past the guards easily. The others are quick to volunteer their assistance, even agreeing to dress up if it would help. With the makeup and attire found (in where they assumed to be a prep room for performers), they quickly get to work.

Just as they're done with their preparations, there's a soft knock on the door. All five of them freeze and start toward their weapons, only to deflate in relief when they hear a familiar voice.

"Alright. What's the plan, extras?" Bakugou enters, checking the hall behind him before shutting the door. He crosses his arms and waits for them to form a reply, but Ochaco catches his moment of hesitation upon seeing the guys in makeup.

The reaction causes her lips to twitch upwards. Somehow throwing him off gives Ochaco a twinge of satisfaction, one that she uses to fuel her energy as she continues to apply powder to their faces. Midoriya fills him in on their strategy.

With the addition of a guard—Bakugou, since he wouldn't dress up for the life of him—to trail along and attack from the shadows, the plan is set in motion.

They take a moment to compose themselves before stepping out into the halls, holding fans to their faces to mask their expressions. The boys giggle with their best impressions of a lady as they try to get into character, which makes Ochaco grateful for the presence of her fan. They'd otherwise be made by her ever-growing smile.

*This is too funny*, she presses her lips into a smirk, lest she laughs. *It's so bad.*

It seems that most of the guards are fooled, however. The armored men take their hands off the hilt of their weapons. They eye their group for suspicious behavior, but are otherwise left vulnerable.

"Concubines." One of them glares. "So annoying..."

"They're not that bad..." Another says, glancing towards them.

The boys make to step closer, gossiping among themselves in high-pitched whispers to mimic interest. Ochaco and Midoriya reach toward their concealed weapons before nodding to each other. *Ready.*

Seeing their signal, Bakugou steps out from a dark alcove and knocks out the nearest guard. With that as a catalyst, they quickly spring into action, disabling the enemies with close-ranged attacks. It's only a moment later when they've succeeded in their first step, standing over the unconscious men with a victorious air.

"That was terrible," Bakugou deadpans. He nicks a pair of dual swords from a guy at his feet. "You guys are an insult to women everywhere. It's as if you've never met one in your life."

"I thought we were pretty good..." Kaminari mutters, earning a small stomp on his foot. "Ow!"

"As long as it worked..." Midoriya says sheepishly, pocketing his fan. The others make to arm themselves, as only Ochaco and he were able to hide blades in their disguises.

She can't bring herself to side with either party, instead moving them along. Ochaco gestures to the giant doors before them, red and gilded with gold. "Shall we?"





"Ooh—" The girl from before sing-songs at their arrival. "What do we have here?"

"Oi, Shigaraki." A dark-haired man calls out to his ally. He's being shielded by the shadows, so Ochaco can't be sure, but...he looks like he's covered in burns? "You done whining to the emperor? The soldiers made it through." His delivery is lazy as he drags out his words, giving Ochaco the feeling that he couldn't care less about this 'Shigaraki' guy.

"Both of you." 'Shigaraki' steps out. It's a face she recognizes from the mountains. He'd been the one leading the charge. It's hard to forget, seeing as his features stood out with their color; pale blue hair and red eyes, like a blood-seeking beast. "Stop sitting around—Get rid of them!"

His partners are giving off a deadly energy as well with how casually they're responding. Most would leap into action once their pursuers arrive. Their confidence irks Ochaco, but she takes the chance to look around more. *Where is the emperor?*

As if reading her question, Shigaraki smirks and opens his arms in a grand gesture. "Your precious ruler is right here."

Sure enough, behind him is the emperor, golden and white attire ruffled from their rough handling but head raised high regardless. It's a comfort to know that the man is standing strong despite his age and the situation at hand. He seems unharmed for the most part, which means that their timing couldn't have been better.

Bakugou makes a move to lash out, only to be countered by the blonde girl, who giggles as she pushes him back with surprising force. "Toga's going to make some new friends! Oh, hey—" She turns to look at Ochaco, tilting her head curiously before breaking into a grin. "You're a girl! Even better!"

Toga leaps into a flip and lands in front of Ochaco, who barely has time to raise her sword to deflect the incoming attack. She's wielding a pair of knives, which allows her to maneuver around with scary fluidity. Not only that—she has the athletic ability of a gymnast.

"Is this how you normally make friends?" Ochaco grits out, exchanging blows with her.

"Yep, yep!" Toga looks over to her partner. "See, even Dabi is having fun!"

"...Focus, Toga." Dabi says, much more emphatic and calmer. "You're leaving your right open."

She was, but Ochaco is soon occupied by something else; more knives are thrown in her direction from the inside of Toga's sleeve—She has more?!

Deftly dodging them, Ochaco finds herself leaping back, and is soon joined by Bakugou, who whispers to her. "You think those guys got around yet?"

"They should be nearby now," she replies as quietly. "We just have to hold them off a bit longer."

That was the plan, after all. Have Bakugou and her distract their enemies while the others sneak to the Emperor and get him out. The quickest way is by gliding over on the lantern lines, which...is arguably a very bad idea, but it's not like there was another mode of escape available to them.

Kaminari will be checking the lines for durability as they fight to ensure that they don't fall, while Midoriya, Sero and Kirishima attempt to push back Shigaraki as one of them leaves with the emperor.

And so they battle against Toga and Dabi, weaving between slashes, engaging their own attacks and little tricks... It's like a dance, almost. One that their enemies seem to be enjoying a little too much.

There's a loud, enraged cry from Shigaraki on the other side, which tells them that the plan is going smoothly. Ochaco readies herself for another wave of attacks from Toga, but is surprised to see that the girl has abandoned their fight to pursue the emperor, who is being carried away to safety by Kaminari and Sero.

In a hasty attempt to cut her off, Ochaco races after them and chops the line, earning a frustrated growl from Toga. She disappears from sight, and it's not too soon when Ochaco realises that she's made it to another line connected to the same point. Before Ochaco can follow and stop Toga, a sword slashes across her view and it takes every instinct in her to back away before it meets her skin.

"I'll go after her!" Midoriya calls over the battle. Leaving Ochaco to focus on the man that attacked her: Dabi.

But her sword's now stuck in the column from when she cut the line, which leaves her with only one option—evade and attempt to throw him off.

Thankfully, someone else enters the scene to hold him back; it's Kirishima, who sends Ochaco a reassuring nod. "Go help Bakugou! I can take this guy."

"Look at the person you're fighting." Dabi draws his attention back, dealing a harsh blow that causes Kirishima to ground his feet in response.

Taking the opportunity to move, Ochaco looks for the other two, realising why Kirishima had asked her to help.

Shigaraki is on a rampage. His movements are rough but powerful, and the unpredictability of them pushes the captain into a corner. "You! It's all your fault!" He cries, planting another fierce hit against Bakugou, eyes wild. "If it wasn't for that avalanche we'd have won by now!"

"HEY!" Ochaco lobs a shoe at his head—it's the only projectile she has at hand. "That was me."

Shigaraki looks at her, sword still locked against Bakugou's. After a moment, his narrowed eyes widen in recognition.

"The person from the mountains..." He grits out, throwing all his energy into kicking Bakugou in the stomach and into the wall, stunning him from getting up.  
"You're going to pay."

"Then come and get me!" From here it's all improv, but Ochaco can't bring herself to just leave Bakugou vulnerable. Especially not with the kind of enemies they're facing now.

She books it through the palace, skidding and turning corners whenever Shigaraki catches up to her. The man is cutting down columns and slashing through everything in his path, blinded by rage. If Ochaco isn't running for survival right now, she would wonder why he's so desperate to win.

Eventually they make it to one of the balconies again, but this time Ochaco is chased to the edge and is forced to escape to the roof.

Upon swinging up there she catches sight of a fireworks tower, which sparks an idea.

"End of the line," Shigaraki prowls toward her, raising his arms to strike. "Out of moves already?"

As he swings down, Ochaco catches his blade in her fan from before. She twists it with as much strength she can muster and frees it from his grasp. In one swift movement, she flips it into the air and catches it, lowering into a battle stance.

Her heart is pounding so hard it almost leaps out of her chest, but Ochaco manages a small smirk at the man. "Not quite."

He curses, stepping towards her. Right onto the spot that she needed him in.

"Now, Iida!" Ochaco shouts.

From across their position they see a burst of flames from the fireworks tower. While Shigaraki is distracted by the interruption, Ochaco quickly stabs the sword through his cape and into the roof.

She lets go of the handle and sprints away, looking for the quickest exit.

There's another roar from behind that tells her she's succeeded in pinning Shigaraki down, but Ochaco doesn't have the time to look back and check as she sees a large lantern hanging by the roof. It looks durable enough to hold her weight, and so in a grand leap she grabs onto it, using her momentum to zip her way to the crowd below the palace, just as the fireworks launch in an eruption of booms and blasts their enemy away.



"Ochaco!" Her mother calls for her. "You have a visitor!"

"Thanks mom, I'll be right there!"

It's been a week since the fiasco with the Huns and the emperor's abduction, and Ochaco has just managed to settle back into her home, catching up with her family and apologising to them. The reunion was an absolute tear-fest, but she wouldn't have had it any other way.

Ochaco and her friends have made arrangements for a meet-up today, so she was handling her chores before the time came. Settling her joss stick and giving her ancestors a bow, Ochaco hurries out from the praying room with a bounce in her steps. It'll be nice to see everyone again without the war weighing on their shoulders!

Her thoughts screech to a stop when she sees who it is waiting for her. Ochaco's expression melts into confusion, and she doesn't bother hiding it from the man at their doorstep. "You're not Deku."

"Obviously." Bakugou rolls his eyes. "He was here earlier, but I sent him off since I had business here."

*Business?*

"Did you need something from me...?" She asks hesitantly. It can't be that he's here to give her family a complaint, right? The emperor had sent her off that day with his crest and Shigaraki's blade, so surely there wouldn't be any trouble...?

"You got so distracted that you forgot your things." He hands Ochaco her father's helmet and sword with an exasperated look. "The armour will be sent in a week's time, since I didn't want to carry it over."

"Wow," Ochaco isn't sure what else to say. "Thanks." She takes a moment to gather her thoughts, before raising a finger to Bakugou. "Could you hold on for a minute? I'll just put these back and then we can go."

Her mother leans toward her, voice teasing. "Who's that? Someone from the army?"

"That's Bakugou. He was our captain." Ochaco turns around from storing the items, giving her a look. "It's not like that. He was just here to return these."

"Yes, yes, I know."

Setting aside the fact that her mother's voice clearly didn't believe her, Ochaco jogs back to the entryway, quickly closing the gates. "Alright, let's go! We can't leave them waiting!"

To her surprise, there is someone she didn't recognise at their gathering. A captain with peculiar white and red hair and heterochromatic eyes. He seems to have a knack for getting under Bakugou's skin, which tells Ochaco that he'll be fun to get along with.

Winding down from the last topic, Todoroki turns to Midoriya, offering him a place in his unit. "It'll be nice to have a strategic mind with us. Besides," he looks at the other captain. "Uraraka is probably being scouted by Bakugou already."

Ochaco almost chokes on her tea. “What?!”

“I never said that, half-an-half.” Bakugou is obviously annoyed by the assumption.

“But in the last meeting, you—”

“Don’t go around spilling confidential info, Todoroki!”

They’re unmistakably familiar with each other, no matter how Bakugou might attempt to refute it. Kirishima has already applied for another position in the army himself, while Kaminari and Sero are settling back into their civilian lives.

This group of friends, formed through a period of war.. It’s something that Ochaco never would’ve imagined before leaving for the training camp.

Iida got the recognition he deserved, while Tsuyu decided to stick around. Ochaco isn’t sure what will come in the future, but with a pleasant ending to this chapter, she looks forward to what’s to come.

*Yep. She thinks happily as the table descends into laughter. As long as these guys are with me, I’ll be able to take on anything.*











Heckhaye



# Going the Distance

A *Hercules* AU by Trish in collaboration with Meekhayl (left)

It is said that a hero's journey begins with a single footstep.

Well, Eijiro Kirishima thinks he must have surely taken a few billion steps at this point judging by the shocking amount he's sweating. Beads pool and drip down the sides of his face, the back of his neck and even in embarrassing places where he hadn't known sweating is possible. His embarrassingly old school traditional wool-en toga clings to him, the one his father insisted he wear, essentially boiling him alive as he drags his legs higher and higher up the ridiculously impractical hill. The knapsack on his shoulder slips with nearly every excruciating step as he struggles to force himself to complete this journey.

"Turn eighteen," he huffs to himself as he staggers forward. "*It'll be fun*, they said."

Truthfully, they, being his parents, *had* been right. Up until this moment, turning eighteen has been great. He's finally allowed to drink wine at public gatherings, now eligible for marriage arrangements (not that he's very interested, but still likes knowing he *can* get married) and after this little jaunt to some dumb temple, he'll be considered a real Man. Just the idea of it sends little manly shivers down his body, despite the heat from walking for so long under the burning sun.

Though it's late into the autumn season, up here this high the heat's scorching. He'd love nothing more than to chuck his stupid toga off onto the beaten path he's following, pull out his cell phone and call an Uber to drive him the rest of the way, but his overly traditional parents had insisted that not only is the itchy as hell toga necessary to wear when one meets a god, but all modern tech should be ditched in order for him to get more in tune with the traditional ancient-ness of it all. Thinking about it, Eijiro can't help but chuckle slightly at how insane his parents are.

Frankly, Eijiro's only heard of a handful of people from his town that have been sent on this coming of age trip in the past century. An unsupervised solo hike across the dense flat plains, through the ancient woods, past the shoreline of the great sea and then up and up through the mountain sides until finally finding nestled high up on a hill, the Temple of the Gods. There he's meant to place his offering, pray to All Might for guidance and then come back down the hill as a full-fledged Man. It's a deeply old, very silly tradition that most families did away with years ago, probably because sending a teenager on a weeklong voyage without any way to call for help probably isn't the most responsible thing to do. And also, who needs to talk to a hunk of stone to become a man? Well, apparently *his* father did, the one who insisted he make the same voyage his parents forced him to make, without argument, (though Eijiro *did* try to argue against it). So had a few others in stories shared by his friends or passing neighbors in the town square

when they heard of his age.

Most of the tales though were told by old folk. Wrinkled men still clinging to the ideas of their own youth; of god-given adventures and heroic deeds. Eijiro easily brushes those stories away as nonsense passed to him through worn lips.

Though Eijiro knows this trip is just for show, it will make his parents, especially his father, very happy. So he's decided to suck it up, leave his phone at home, put on the stupid costume, and go on the trip despite the blatant impracticality and disregard for his safety.

Walking up the side of a mountain for the past two days *is* doing wonders for his leg muscles though and sweating aside, he really doesn't have very much to complain about. And even though he hates to admit it, it's kinda nice being cut off from the world. It's just him, the woods, and the breath in his chest. Eijiro has never felt more manly.

As the trees begin to thin out and the path takes on a more horizontal angle, Eijiro begins to see the first signs of the entry to the temple. Below him, the dirt path suddenly changes to a stone one. Huge slabs of cracked granite weave a trail ahead of him, flanked on either side by intricately carved pillars made for holding flames to light a path to the temple.

Eijiro finds himself suddenly humbled by the grandiose nature of the craftsmanship, pausing to straighten up his hunched posture. Eijiro adjusts his garb for the millionth time, fussing with his knapsack and then taking a deep, full-bodied breath before letting it out in a small sigh before beginning up the path.

Soon, the old granite slabs fan out, bleeding into a small but still impressive courtyard up to the steps of the temple. The temple itself is a surprisingly large and very beautiful piece of architecture. A looming grey building with huge columns tower in front of him, holding up a massive pointed ceiling that seems to reach into the heavens of Yuuei itself. An archway which appears to be carved out of marble is centered in front of him, beyond are aged massive wooden doors, one of which is cracked open. Through the space, Eijiro can see the flickering of what might be a fire behind it.

Looking around, Eijiro tries to spot evidence of another person and realizes he can't find any. There is a possibility of a homeless person, or maybe a group of kids scoping the place out on a dare. The idea of anyone else casually coming to the old temple seems strange, especially at this darkening hour. Steeling his courage, Eijiro steadies his breath and tip toes the rest of the way to the temple. When he reaches the door, he braces himself and peeks his head inside. The room is essentially one giant rectangle. The walls are at least 20 meters tall, not counting the huge angled ceiling decorated with murals depicting scenes of all the Old Gods and Heroes of Yuuei. The stone walls appear to also be carved with ornately detailed scenes as well, though without more than a few scattered carved openings for light that could sneak through, it's hard for him to see what exactly the scenes might be of. One end of the room is brighter, a fire lit in one of the pots near the base of the statue he's here to see. Sitting in an unbelievably massive marbled



throne is an equally massive statue of All Might. The sight of it sends a thrill of awe through Eijiro. Just as he's about to step inside to get closer, a curse startles him still.

"Why the fuck are you staying quiet?!" A voice barks out in the dark temple.

Eijiro, unsure of what to do, remains still at the door as he looks for the person responsible for all the yelling.

"All this way for a broken fucking statue? Pfft. Some god you are," the voice says again.

Squinting, Eijiro peers harder into the room and sudden movement catches his eye. Behind the lit stone pot, someone stands and chucks something at the statue which clatters to the ground after bouncing off the marble face. The person moves to pick it up and throws it again. And again. Each time it just bounces off the statue while he yells, clearly irate.

"Make. Me. A. Hero!"

Seemingly exhausted, the person puts their hands on their knees as they huff to catch their breath.

Not sensing danger, apart from possible mental illness (this person's screaming at a statue after all), Eijiro decides it's safe enough to make his presence known. Stepping all the way into the room, Eijiro begins to walk towards the statue and the man.

"Uh, hello?" Eijiro says loudly when he's about halfway into the room.

The man screams in shock before quickly ducking behind the fire pot.

"Ah! I'm sorry!" Eijiro calls out, unsure if he should walk any closer. "I didn't mean to scare you!"

It's quiet, save for the sounds of the crackling fire and then, a huff.

"You didn't scare me. Now get the hell out of here," the stranger demands, yet remains behind the fire pot.

Eijiro chuckles, lifting an arm to scratch at the back of his head. His own body odor hits him like a ton of bricks and he immediately puts it back down, hoping the other man in the room can't smell him from this far away. "Uh," Eijiro starts, "do you know how long you're gonna be?"

At this, a head peeks out from the side of the pot. "I was here first, now get lost!"

"To what? Vandalize a statue? Isn't that illegal?"

"I am not vandalizing shit moron, I'm trying to have a *conversation*. A private one!"

Ah, Eijiro was correct to guess mental illness.

Very slowly, Eijiro raises his arms in a defensive, hopefully non-threatening manner. "I am so very sorry to have interrupted your err... conversation. Look, I just have to do something very quickly and then you and your uhh... friend can keep talking and I will get out of your way. Deal?"

"HA!" The man laughs, fully standing and coming around to cock his hip out and plant a fist against it while his other hand points at the statue of All Might. "You think I'm friends with this lying bastard?!" Without warning the man suddenly runs up to the statue and starts to kick it's stone robe. "You promised! You promised! You promised!"

Not wanting to have to deal with any of whatever this whole scene is, Eijiro quietly sneaks up closer while the man continues to kick at the immovable stone. With one eye on the guy, Eijiro pulls his knapsack off his shoulder and undoes the laces keeping it closed. Moving closer to the fire, Eijiro pulls out the piece of paper nestled inside and reads over his father's writing, trying his best to get this done in as little amount of time as possible and without catching the crazy man's eye. Luckily, he's still too busy cursing at the marble to pay attention to him. Glancing down at the paper, he reads the note by fireside.

*Son,*

*I'm proud of you for making it this far. It's your first real step to becoming a man, and I couldn't be happier to have a son like you following in my footsteps.*

- 1. Place the offering at the foot of All Might*
- 2. Bow and say your prayers*
- 3. LISTEN!*

*What you do with his words is up to you, but know that your mother and I will always support you.*

*Love always,*

*Dad*

Tucking the note back into his bag, Eijiro reaches in again, fiddling about until he finds the offering hidden in the folds of his spare clothes. The offering, his father said, is meant to be a prized possession from childhood. Something to cut his ties with his youth to fully establish himself as a man. This is another part of turning into an adult that he doesn't like, but he respects his father enough to do as he's asked. Pulling out the small carved figure of his favorite hero, Eijiro gives it one last longing look. He's had this little guy for as long as he can remember and rubs the figure's face with his thumb one last time. With a small smile, Eijiro looks at his toy in a parting glance, hoists the bag over his shoulder and then strides toward the statue. He isn't sure how well he'll be able to hear the "voice of All Might" with the guy next to him still pitching a fit, but he's pretty sure it's all a metaphor anyway.

Setting down his hero figure at the base of the statue, Eijiro takes a step back and slides his knapsack off of his shoulder, setting it onto the floor before bowing as

low as he can.

A laugh sends him bolting upright.

"Wow. Holy shit, you're legit aren't you?"

His unexpected temple companion has stopped beating on the statue and now watches him with a smirk on his face. He and the blond seem to be about the same age. "Don't let me stop you, shitty hair. C'mon, you gotta pray to this piece of crap next, right?" He lets out a bitter laugh before spitting on the ground. "Fair warning though, this guy isn't going to do shit."

Shoving his hands into his pocket, the boy walks past Eijiro, towards one of the benches and sits down. Eijiro feels stupid and embarrassed to have this guy play audience. "Well," he says, expectantly nodding in All Might's direction, "go on."

Hoping that it's too dark in the room for the other to see his blush, Eijiro turns his back on him and bows again. It's almost humiliating knowing he's doing this while a stranger watches his back, but sometimes being a man means doing things you don't necessarily want to do. Trying to push his mind back to the task at hand, Eijiro lowers himself to his knees as he brings his hands up to clasp near his face. "Dear All Mig—"

"WHAT ARE YOU DOING?!"

Eijiro slaps his hands onto his thighs as he whips his head around to glare at the blond. "I am *trying to pray* and you are being very rude!"

He snickers. "Okay but you know you don't have to actually say it out loud, right? What are you? Eight?"

"I'm eighteen," Eijiro retorts with a sniff.

"You sure about that, shitty hair? Because so am I and I wasn't nearly as embarrassing as you are when I came here to do the stupid offering. God, you're even wearing a real toga."

"You can go you know? Like you don't have to be here mocking me for zero reason. Let me get this done and then I can leave you all alone here to kick at a statue for the rest of your life. Just shut up."

Shadows from the fire are dancing along his face, giving the other man a menacing look as he grins wickedly at Eijiro. "Ah, so the baby has some bite."

"This baby is going to kick your as—"

"BOYS! ENOUGH!"

Eijiro freezes, his entire being going rigid as his eyes scan the room wildly for the person responsible for yelling so loud that the temple itself seems to rattle.

The boy on the bench seems unfazed as he stands up quickly and flips off someone behind Eijiro. "Took you long enough, damnit."

"Katsuki, must we do this every time?" the voice says, sounding tired. "Ah, Eijiro! I'm so happy you're here!"

Slowly, Eijiro turns his head around. When he does, he nearly passes out.

Beaming down at him with genuine fondness is the statue of All Might giving him a toothy stoned smile. "I've been waiting for you, you know!"

Eijiro squeaks.

"Get it together extra," the boy, presumably Katsuki says, suddenly next to him. Katsuki isn't looking at him though, his hard-red eyes trained on All Might. "So you big rock bastard, am I a hero yet or not!?"

All Might groans, rubbing one of his giant marble hands against his face. "I've told you Katsuki, it doesn't just work that way. If you want to become a hero and get into Yuuei you've got to prove yourself! You need *training*! You need *guidance*! You need *Izu*—"

"I swear if you say *Izuku* to me *one more damn time* I'm gonna..." Katsuki sneers as he trails off, fist returning to rest against his hip, the other back to pointing up at the statue.

The statue that is, in all sense of the word, very much alive.

"E-E-Excuse me," Eijiro stutters out. "But... what?"

He's aware it isn't an actual question, but his brain doesn't seem to be working too well.

"Ah, apologies my boy!" All Might says. "Ignore young Katsuki here, he's just very eager to finish his Hero's journey. But then again, you must be as well!"

"Hero's Journey?"

Minimally worded question seems to be Eijiro's only form of working communication at present.

All Might laughs, but it's gentle and considerate, unlike the mocking one Katsuki is doing next to him.

"You are telling me that this guy," Katsuki scoffs, pointing a thumb in Eijiro's direction, "This idiot here in a damned *toga* is Hero material?"

Heroes, talking statues, journeys, getting into Yuuei? All of these things have Eijiro's head spinning and his knees buckling. He promptly sits on the ground. "Please. And I don't care who," Eijiro says from the floor, "but will someone tell me what the heck is going on?"

Katsuki sighs dramatically above him before promptly sitting on the ground next to him, splaying his arms out behind him as he throws his head back, clearly annoyed. "Ugh," is all he says as a way of explanation.

All Might, however, smiles at him fondly before rising off of his throne. With huge

eyes, Eijiro watches as the statue extends to full height, his head nearly touching the tall painted ceiling before leaning down and extending his hand to Eijiro, palm out. "Don't be afraid my boy, I won't hurt you. Come on now."

On shaky limbs Eijiro stands and finds himself looking over at Katsuki.

The boy just rolls his eyes, as if interacting with a huge god statue is a totally normal thing that he does every day. Maybe he does? Eijiro makes a mental note to ask him as he gingerly steps forward and onto All Might's waiting palm. With a *whoosh*, Eijiro is lifted high into the air until he's eye level with All Might. His stone eyes are somehow filled with an unimaginable life as he grins.

"There! Now we can get to know each other better! Tell me Eijiro, what exactly do you know about becoming a Hero?" he asks.

Truthfully, Eijiro doesn't really know much. He's grownup on the stories of course, of mortals being given a God's Quest to become a Hero. But he doesn't know how it actually worked. It isn't like he ever believed in any of it and he definitely never thought to ask for instructions.

"Well," Eijiro starts, thinking hard. "I know that you have to be given a quest to become one?"

Katsuki tisks from somewhere below and Eijiro has to fight the urge to stick his tongue out at him.

"That's right! You *do* need to be given a quest. By a God to be exact! What else?"

"Uhh..." Eijiro scratches his head, trying to force his brain to come up with something, anything.

All Might puts him out of his misery with a knowing nod.

"It's okay, I'll fill you in!" he says before giving him a smirk and leans his face in a little closer to Eijiro. "Katsuki here didn't know either, so don't let him fool you," he whispers conspiratorially. It makes Eijiro feel a bit better, and he gives All Might a small smile.

"When the Earth was first formed, there was peace among the Gods. We all worked together very harmoniously! All of us had special tasks of course, different things we were in charge of, but our number one priority was to keep you mortals safe." All Might's cheerful face suddenly morphs into a frown. "This peace lasted for many millennia, until one day... there was a dispute."

A light bulb goes off in his head and Eijiro perks up. "I remember this! Overhaul wanted to be in charge, right?"

Solemnly, All Might nods. "Yes, essentially. Back then his job was to take care of the souls of those who passed on into the Underworld. But something changed in him, Eijiro. What it was, I cannot say. No one knows for sure. But without warning, Overhaul wanted more. It wasn't enough for souls to come to him naturally. No, he..." All Might trails off, his stone eyes going surprisingly dark. "He took matters



into his own hands. Created monsters to bring more souls to him, and brought evil, chaos and destruction into the world."

With his free hand, All Might scrubs at his face before focusing his eyes back on Eijiro. "We were able to stop him and condemn him strictly to the underworld, but still, his minions linger. They hide in the dark shadows and corners of the Earth, still heeding his commands." All Might sighs again. "Even now, we still don't know how many are left. Too many of them for even us Gods to handle. But just when we thought Earth was destined to succumb to Overhaul's darkness, a simple mortal changed everything."

"Can you skip over this part!" Katsuki suddenly groans loudly. "No one wants to hear about shitty Deku!"

"I do," Eijiro insists, unable to stop himself from shooting down at Katsuki. Deku was the first mortal to become a Hero according to the legends and one of the only Heroes Eijiro actually knows about.

"As I was saying before I was rudely interrupted," All Might says, giving Katsuki a pointed look, "in the midst of all the doom and gloom a mortal named Izuku managed to defeat one of Overhaul's villains. Until then, we never knew a mortal was capable of such strength. This effort nearly killed him, but Izuku never once backed down. After, it was the unanimous decision of the gods to grant him Hero status. And for years Deku fought alongside us with his granted powers, but being mortal-born still meant his body could eventually be worn down unlike ours. When he began to slow, we decided to begin searching for another mortal who was worthy of being his successor and to fight with us. We of course couldn't just give powers to any mortal, only those with a truly heroic heart could become a worthy Hero. And this is why you are hero Eijiro."

"I didn't come here to be a Hero," Eijiro admits quietly. "I came here to become a man."

"Eijiro," All Might says gently, "not just any mortal is able to draw me here. You've got a heroic heart beating in that chest of yours my boy. Had you not, I wouldn't have been able to appear before you."

Shaking his head, Eijiro raises his hands defensively. "No no no, you've got the wrong guy. I'm no Hero, I'm just Eijiro. Plain, boring Eijiro. Look at me, do I *look* like I can take on monsters?!"

"Hell no!" Katsuki yells for him.

Eijiro nods his head. "See, he knows what's up. Look All Might, Mister Head God sir, I am just here because my dad asked me to be. He told me to put on this outfit, give you my old toy, say a couple prayers and head home. I... I... how can someone like *me* be a Hero?"

"Easily," All Might says, poking him in the chest with his huge stone finger. "You've already got the heart for it. You just have to believe in yourself! And with a little guidance and training, Eijiro, you *can* be a Hero!"

Dumbfounded, Eijiro plops himself down on All Might's hand with a huff.

A Hero? *Him?* He'd never thought about it before, not that he even knew it was a possibility up until a few minutes ago. But suddenly, his brain starts imagining it. Playing off of the fantastical stories he used to dream up as a kid, he can picture himself in a way he never thought possible. Him, strong and god like, fighting villains, defeating evil, saving people. His pulse began to quicken as he looks up at All Might, the realization that all of this is *real*.

"So what do you say, Eijiro? Do you accept your quest?"

Without a second thought, Eijiro shakes his head yes.

A huge clap of thunder shakes the temple as All Might cheers, squeezing Eijiro in his palm, making him gasp. "Yes my boy! Yes!"

As he's being squeezed within an inch of his life, a bolt of lightning lights up the temple, striking the ground in a huge crash. Fully expecting the ground to have exploded by the force of impact, Eijiro's shocked to see that instead of debris, a yellow haired man stands in the same exact place where he's sure that the lightning just struck.

"Evening sir!" the man says with a friendly grin, his golden eyes falling onto Eijiro. "Oh! Who is this?!"

"Denki, this is Eijiro. Eijiro, this is Denki, my messenger."

Denki gives Eijiro a wave. Awkwardly, Eijiro gives him a stiff nod in return, unsure of godly protocol.

As All Might lowers Eijiro to the ground, he addresses his messenger. "Now, I need you to alert Izuku that Eijiro has accepted to start his training and that he will be accompanying Kats—"

"WHAT!?" Katsuki roars, jumping up off the ground. "I *told you!* I am *not* going back to that nerd. I don't care even if he is the stupid number one Hero and I am *definitely not* going with some idiot who doesn't even know how to dress himself!"

Denki snorts, rolling his eyes. "Great," he says sarcastically, "Katsuki's still around. I thought Izuku kicked him outta training?"

Katsuki visibly bristles. "He did *not*, I *left!*"

"Katsuki," All Might says, his voice becoming stern as he stands to his full height when Eijiro's out of his hand. "Do you want to become a Hero?"

"*Obviously,*" he says, gritting his teeth.

"Then you need to learn how to work with others," All Might tells him flatly. "There is no denying you've got a strong heart, but as I've told you, that *isn't* all it takes to become a True Hero. I still have faith in you, I still believe in you, but Katsuki if you want this, truly want this, you've got a lot of work to do before you're proven to be worthy of the title."

To Eijiro's surprise, Katsuki stays quiet at his words, though his face does turn bright red as he averts his eyes downward.

"Now Denki," All Might starts, focusing his attention on the other man.

"Yes sir?"

"As I said, please send word to Izuku immediately so he is prepared, and after, I will need Sho—"

"Oh joy, I have to see that stupid glorified pegasus again? This just gets better and better," Katsuki snaps, his embarrassment at being reprimanded just a moment earlier seemingly gone completely.

"Wait," Eijiro says, eyes growing large. "A real live pegasus?!"

"Don't get excited, loser," Katsuki grunts at him. "*Shoto*," he says the name with contempt, "is just stupid Izuku's errand boy and he's almost just as annoying. You'll see."

"Funny," Denki laughs, "Shoto was just saying how annoying *you* are."

Katsuki moves to raise a fist and All Might plucks him up from the ground by the back of his black shirt, ignoring him when he starts to flail. "Denki, that's enough. Go, please."

Denki grins, tossing Eijiro a wink before another bolt of lightning strikes the ground and just as quickly as he appeared, he vanishes. Eijiro blankly stares at the spot, trying to force his mind to accept these events as reality.

"While preparations are being made, Katsuki you will be in charge of showing Eijiro his place in the temple and answer any questions he may have," All Might instructs as he returns the blond to the ground. "I will know if you don't."

With a heavy groan, Katsuki shoves his hands deep into the pockets of his jeans and begins stomping away without giving Eijiro a second glance.

"Eijiro, I understand this must be a lot for you to take in," All Might says gently, while sitting back down onto his throne, "but don't worry, I trust that soon you will find yourself more than comfortable."

With about a thousand questions burning on the tip of tongue, Eijiro opens his mouth to speak but nothing but an overwhelmed choking sound squeaks out. All Might chuckles at the noise, settling into his seat. "Be calm Eijiro, it'll all be okay, you'll see."

From across the room, standing in front of a doorway he hadn't noticed until now, Katsuki claps his hands, giving Eijiro a start. "Oi, shitty hair, you coming or what?"

Rocking on his heels, Eijiro looks from All Might to Katsuki unsure of what he's supposed to do.

"Go with him," All Might encourages. "He'll take care of you."

Eijiro raises an eyebrow, unable to hide his doubt at those words.

"He too has a Hero's heart Eijiro, don't let his terrible personality deceive you."

"I can hear you old man!" Katsuki yells at the statue, flipping him off with ease.

All Might laughs again. In the next moment, he's frozen; his body returning to the immovable stone that Eijiro had first laid eyes on. The difference is so startling that he wonders briefly if he's imagined it all.

"C'mon dumbass, he's gone. Grab your shit and let's go, I don't have all night."

Hurriedly, Eijiro grabs his discarded knapsack and then jogs after Katsuki who walks through the doorway. Katsuki leads him down a corridor and into a small round chamber.

"Alright listen up, shitty hair," Katsuki announces, turning around to face Eijiro. There's a lit sconce on the wall next to them, the fire crackling and dancing cheerfully, casting shadows on Katsuki's face. Until now, he hasn't really had a chance to get a good look at him, and he's surprised to discover that the rude boy is unexpectedly handsome. Eijiro shakes the thought out of his mind, forcing himself to focus on what Katsuki's saying. "First, you're hitting the bath because there's no way in hell I'm sleeping next to your stench."

Eijiro blanches, becoming immediately self-conscious.

"Ugh, don't look at me like that!" Katsuki snaps.

"Like what!" Eijiro huffs back, his face burning.

"Like a damn kicked puppy! You reek okay! Don't get mad at me for being honest." Eijiro scowls, but doesn't say anything, knowing Katsuki's absolutely right. He really does stink.

"To your left, that's where you'll find the bathroom. Big hole in the ground, lots of water, can't miss it. Also, please tell me you brought another change of clothes. I'm going to die of secondhand embarrassment if I have to keep looking at you in that stupid toga."

"Of course I do!" Eijiro snaps, face somehow burning harder. "I'm only wearing this because my parents made me!"

"Wow, I can't believe your parents hate you. That's sad."

Eijiro makes a face at him, deciding he's had enough of this stupidly pretty jerk. Stomping off in the direction he pointed to, Eijiro ignores the laughter that follows after him. He finds the bathroom easily enough, slightly miffed that Katsuki's description is actually accurate. It really is just another chamber only with a large pool in the middle filled to the brim with steaming water.

Along the edge is a stack of towels and a bottle with what Eijiro assumes is soap. After discarding his clothes in a pile, Eijiro slides into the water, immediately sighing. The hot water is comforting to his aching body, his muscles soothed by the

slight sting. Even though he'd love nothing more than to soak for an obscene amount of time, he forces himself to bathe quickly. After giving the contents of the bottle a cautious sniff, Eijiro concludes that whatever is inside must be soap, and even if it isn't, it still smells a heck of a lot better than he does so he'll take the risk. Once he's clean, a welcome feeling, he gets out of the tub and dries himself off before digging out his change of clothes from his bag.

Eijiro dresses quickly before stuffing his dirty toga back in his bag and makes his way to the chamber Katsuki first took him to. On his way, he spots a light shining from beyond another hallway and makes his way towards it.

"Katsuki?" Eijiro calls out.

"In here, dummy."

Katsuki's seated at a small table, a bowl of something steaming and delicious smelling sitting in front of him. "You look better. Smell a whole lot better too," Katsuki grins.

Eijiro scowls at him.

"Oh come off it. Here, sit down and eat."

There's a place made up for him already, and under the table Katsuki kicks the chair across the table out in indication. The gesture is oddly charming, totally at odds with his dumpster fire of a personality.

"Thanks," Eijiro tells him, feeling suddenly shy as he sits down. "It smells good. What is it?"

"Of course it does, I made it. And it's curry you dipshit, don't your eyes work?" Katsuki huffs out as he digs into his own bowl and scoops out a heaping spoonful. He takes a bite and closes his eyes, seemingly enjoying himself. Following suit, Eijiro does the same, annoyed to find that it really does taste as good as it smells. Together they eat in silence, the only sounds between them are the smacking of lips and hums of appreciation. When their bowls are done, Eijiro expects Katsuki to get up, but instead he stares at him expectedly across the table.

"Thank you for the meal," Eijiro says, dipping his head.

"That's all you've got to say?"

"Uhh..."

"Really? All Might himself comes to life right before your beady little eyes, gives you a God's quest to become a damn Hero and the only thing you've got to say is 'thanks for the meal?' Are you serious?"

Despite his harsh words, Katsuki actually looks amused. There's a light behind his eyes, a sort of sparkling mischief that tells Eijiro that being a little shit is fun for him. Eijiro rolls his eyes at him and sighs, feigning annoyance.

"I've just had a very strange day, can you let me chill for a second?"



Katsuki raises an eyebrow at him. "You've bathed and you're fed, I think you've had plenty of time to 'chill', Eijiro. So either ask me a question or we are going to sleep and it'll be your own fault if tomorrow is even stranger for you."

"What's going to happen tomorrow?" Eijiro asks automatically.

"Training, probably. Next?"

"Ugh. Okay, what *kind* of training?"

Katsuki smirks at him. "Hero training."

"Bro, are you serious?!"

With a laugh, Katsuki waves him off. "Okay, okay, fuck I'm just messing with you. Not my fault you're easy to tease." Eijiro gives him a dirty look and Katsuki laughs at him again. "Shit sorry, alright? Fine. I'll be serious."

Eijiro thinks for a second as he settles on a question. "Did you know about any of this? Like, did you think any of this was real?"

"Not at fucking all," Katsuki tells him. "My old hag said I needed to come out here, you know, do that stupid eighteenth birthday blessing, only she didn't make me wear an ugly ass toga." He pauses to wiggle his eyebrows at Eijiro. "And then stupid All Might is suddenly alive and going off about me being a Hero and all that mess. You're luckier than me, I didn't have some awesome guy there with me to help ease me into it. I was alone when All Might started yelling. I nearly shit my pants."

"Wait, how long have you been here?"

"Since April. I haven't *only* been here though. I've been stuck with stupid ass Izuku and Shoto for most of it learning fuck all. Which is where we will be going tomorrow now that you're finally here."

"Wait, wait, wait," Eijiro says, trying to get his mind to wrap around the fact that Katsuki has been *training* with the actual very first ever Hero. "What do you mean now that I'm here?"

Crossing his arms, Katsuki's bottom lip juts out in a slight pout. "Look, I don't know the exact details but practically since I first got here... I've been told that I wasn't going to be the only one. I tried to tell them to shove it, because I don't *need* anyone else to be a damn Hero, but these bastards have been refusing to teach me any more stuff! So even though I don't want you here, no fucking offense, if I'm going to be a True Hero like All Might has been bitching about, I guess I have to suck it up. Learn how to work with a partner and all that."

Uncrossing his arms, Katsuki uses his freed hands to tug at his own hair as he stares at Eijiro across the table. "Anyway, looks like we're stuck together huh? Lucky you."

Reaching out, Katsuki collects the bowls from off of the table, leaving Eijiro to sit alone as he walks through a doorway into another side room. It's only after a few

minutes that Katsuki calls for him.

"What? Do you need an invitation!?"

Eijiro jumps to his feet and gets up, following the sound of Katsuki's voice. When he makes his way into the other room, he immediately blushes. Katsuki faces him with his shirt off as he pulls back linens on a raised platform. It's a bed. A huge bed, but still, a bed.

Katsuki furrows his brow at him. "You gonna make this weird? Eijiro, I just told you, we're apparently going to be stuck together for however long, might as well get used to being subjected to my beauty," he trails off in a joke. "Plus there isn't another bed. But if you want to be a fucking baby about it, sleep on the floor for all I care."

After that, Katsuki doesn't look at him, his hands busying themselves as he fusses with the bedding for what Eijiro takes as a nervous gesture. It makes him feel slightly better as he slides under the covers, doing his best to take up as little room as possible. Katsuki snuffs out the nearby light before pulling back his own blankets to join Eijiro in the bed. Both of them are laying on their back, awkward and practically frozen until finally, Katsuki sighs and rolls over to face him. "Hey, look at me."

Turning his head, Eijiro meets his gaze in the darkened room.

"I... I'm not that fucking good with words, but listen, alright?" Katsuki pauses to bite at his lip as he closes his eyes for a second, seemingly trying to put the right words together. "I know today has been fucking weird, trust me I know. But you didn't lose your shit and that makes me think you might not be the worst person to be teamed up with."

"Errr... thanks?"

"Shut up, I'm not done!" Katsuki practically growls, his eyes narrowing into slits as he glares at him. "But if you're meant to be a Hero, that means you must be kind of a badass and I guess what I'm trying to say is, I don't hate you. Now shut the fuck up and go to sleep. I won't let you bring me down tomorrow, got it?" Katsuki doesn't wait for a response, just promptly rolls over to leave Eijiro smiling stupidly at his bare back.

And Eijiro doesn't have any idea what tomorrow is going to bring. Frankly, he's more than half expecting to wake up in his own bed; to discover this entire day has been some sort of bizarre fever dream. But for now, for however long this lasts, Eijiro grins into his pillow and just as he's falling asleep to the soft sound of Katsuki's snores he sends a little prayer off to All Might, hoping that when he wakes up it'll be to Katsuki's back and a Hero's adventure waiting for them.













# And the Glamour is Broken

A *Cinderella* AU by Synnie

Togaru Kamakiri shifted a few pieces of hair into place. His green dyed hair was supposed to be slicked back but a few stubborn strands refused to stay down, so he ran his hand through it to give himself a messy coif that in his opinion, suited him better.

His mother, the Queen Regent, had been mortified when he came back with green hair instead of his usual dirty blond after he had gone to ride with the military for a while. The soldiers had done it as a prank before they realized he was their prince. He liked it though, so he kept it.

He liked the contrast to what was expected of him, plus it suited him. He smoothed the front of his crisp, black suit jacket down as he gazed at his reflection. The buttons caught the light and shone brightly. As they should, given that were made from real gold and pearls. A bit fancy for his personal taste, but it was expected for the Crown Prince of Scythersonia.

It was a heavy title and even though he had been groomed for it his entire life, it didn't make it any easier. Decisions that determined the prosperity of the kingdom rested on his broad shoulders. Everything from wars to agriculture. Everything. It was all about to be his.

His mother had been ruling as Queen Regent for many years now until he came of age and could rule as King. His coronation would take place in a few weeks and then it would be all up to him. And his Consort.

His Consort was to be chosen that night at a ball being held in his honour—a grand celebration marking his twentieth year and the year he would be crowned King of Scythersonia. It was a tradition. A tradition he hated. Pick an attractive person at random, get to know whatever facade they want to show, then hope they're capable of ruling. It was true that Consorts didn't often rule or even co-rule, but like the case of his mother, sometimes they must step in. Scythersonia had some unfortunate years in its past where this tradition didn't work out as well as hoped.

It was part of the reason he travelled with the army. Learning the ways of tactical warfare was important even if Scythersonia had been peaceful for decades. Togaru had also been hoping a soldier would catch his eye so he would be able to choose someone he'd gotten to know, but he hadn't had any luck.

A knock on the door roused him from his musings and he immediately straightened, posture perfect as was expected of a prince. When it opened, an armoured guard stepped in and bowed. "It is time, Your Highness. The ball is starting."

"Thanks, Bondo," Togaru acknowledged with a lazy nod when he saw who it was and relaxed. He followed the guard down the hall towards the large ballroom. Towards his future.

Bondo had been the head of his personal guard for years and knew the prince hated waiting so he didn't collect him until it was almost time for Togaru's entrance. He was a man of action and he considered this ball to be a battle in its own way. Deception would be all around him as the attendees showed him the best they had to offer. He needed to navigate it carefully.

Finally though, he heard his introduction. He stood still in front of the ornate double doors that would open, his head high and his hands clasped in front of him.

"Presenting His Royal Highness, Prince Togaru."

The doors opened and he could see a sea of hundreds of faces before him. It took everything in him (along with a nudge from Bondo) not to just turn and leave. Togaru was already done with these people. Nevertheless, he entered the room and addressed the attendees with a short bow before giving his mother an exaggerated one, no doubt letting her know that his feelings towards the ball hadn't changed since he told her his views yet again that morning. Nothing could be done now though. Togaru descended the short staircase separating the thrones from the ballroom floor so he could meet each and every available potential consort.

It took a couple of hours, but Togaru had finally met every single eligible person in attendance. His mother had supported his request to include men, not just maidens. Though when he made his request, he hadn't realized exactly how many people he would need to meet. A quick glance at his mother and receiving a slight smile with a cheeky glint in her eyes told him she knew and chose not to tell him. It didn't help that the guests had all dissolved into groups to socialize and he ended up speaking to some of them multiple times. He didn't doubt for a second that some people were mingling from group to group just so that they could have an extra turn with him. Lucky him.

Togaru had low expectations, but high standards. He hadn't expected it to be a very successful night, so he was surprised to find a few guests had caught his eye.

One he dismissed early on—Lady Kyoka Jirou—as a possibility when he learned she was courting one of the women also in attendance. He enjoyed her company though and would often return to speak with her and the Lady Yaoyorozu in between seeing other guests. No doubt others saw her as competition and he watched their interactions with her. She had no interest in him or his crown and while her respectfulness never wavered, she was real with him. It was refreshing after dealing with so many fake smiles.

Lady Setsuna Tokage was interesting. She talked a lot and there was no masking her confidence. It was definitely something Togaru admired. When he was watching from afar, he saw her helping one of the other ladies adjust her dress before a mishap could occur and he appreciated such kindness. But upon speaking to her, he couldn't help but notice there was a gleam in her eye. If she was on his side, he

could tell she would be ruthless and the kingdom may even expand further under their joint rule. But she could do terrible damage if she had her own agenda. Had he more time to get to know her and what she truly desired, she could be a formidable match.

Instead he turned his attention to Hiryu Rin. He was from the neighbouring country of Shenrona and had been in Scytheronia visiting family when the demand that all bachelors and eligible maidens were to attend was released. Togaru didn't mind that though. After all, their countries had a strong trade system and taking one of their middle class citizens as a Royal Consort would surely strengthen those ties.

Seeing that her son was occupied and sure that the night was going as it should, the Queen Regent stepped out of the room. She was nearby should she be needed, but if Togaru was taking over the kingdom, he could no doubt handle a ball.



Rin was turning out to be the best part of the ball for him. Staying on the dias talking with him meant less people were getting in his face trying to catch his attention.

Togaru had been talking with Rin for the better part of an hour when a commotion across the ballroom caught his attention.

The crowd parted and revealed two guests arriving far too late to be considered fashionable. Anyone with a pulse would notice the blonde woman with a dress that left very little to the imagination. As attractive as she was, Togaru's attention quickly turned to the blond man a step behind her.

Togaru had never seen him before; he would remember if he had. Faintly, he could hear Rin speaking but it was far away almost as if he were underwater. He was too transfixed by the man walking through the crowd towards him.

His hair was combed to one side and smoothed down, his suit crisp. His shoulders were broad and strong, making him look accustomed to hard work. His smile was small but it suited his face. The air somehow seemed to shimmer around him and Togaru wondered for the briefest moment if that was how school girls felt upon seeing their crush.

Togaru could feel his heart thudding in his chest as the pair approached the dias. The woman curtsied before him and the man bowed.

"Your Highness, I'm Camie Utsushimi. And I'm very eligible."

It was all he could do not to roll his eyes back into his skull completely from the amount of times he'd heard that line tonight.

Togaru nodded to her before turning his attention to the man, his eyes locking with the crimson ones staring up at him. They were warm and hazy, almost unfocused and Togaru couldn't help feeling that something was off. Despite that, Toga-

ru hoped beyond hope that this guy might actually have something more than his face going for him.

"Katsuki Bakugo at your service, Your Highness." A charming smile was thrown at the prince. "You're even more handsome up close."

Disappointment twisted Togaru's gut. It was a pity. He couldn't deny Bakugo was beautiful with his disarming smile and strong build. But he could see that he was just like everyone else. He was the prince and that's all this guy was interested in. If that line was the best he could come up with, spending years with him as not only husbands but also co-rulers would be agony.

"Yes, well, please enjoy yourselves." Togaru forced the pleasantries and turned his attention to Rin, dismissing them.



Togaru had enjoyed Rin's company until Bakugo's arrival. Even though he was disappointed meeting the man, his eyes kept looking for him in the crowd, watching him laugh and mingle with everyone easily. He noticed Bakugo spent at least ten minutes talking to Lady Jirou and Lady Yaoyorozu. Unable to help himself, though he knew it was fruitless with that dull of a personality, Togaru made his way towards Jirou after Bakugo had left to see what the man had been saying. In doing so he passed another small group of people Bakugo had stopped to talk to at one point and eavesdropped into their conversation.

"Kacchan showed up so late but he looks great. A little different than usual, though."

"His learning how to use a hair brush has definitely caught the Prince's eye."

Togaru turned to the voices that belonged to a freckle-faced man he didn't remember meeting though he surely had, and his companion whom Togaru did know.

"Lord Todoroki," he greeted before turning to his companion, "and I apologize I don't recall your name."

"Izuku Midoriya. You've had to meet a lot of people and I don't fault you for forgetting one." He seemed nice enough with an open face and a friendly smile.

"Midoriya, right. I couldn't help but overhear you were talking about Bakugo. Do you know him well?"

"Yes, Your Highness!" Midoriya beamed at him. "He's my step-brother, his father married my mother a couple of years ago. We grew up together as neighbours though, so I've known him my whole life. He said he wasn't going to be here. I'm glad he changed his mind!"

"Interesting. What's he like?"

"Kacchan? Oh, well he's... competitive, determined-"

"Arrogant," Todoroki added.

"-incredibly intelligent-"

"Emotionally constipated."

"Lord Todoroki, please. Kacchan is reflective and strategic. He's funny if you understand his sense of humour. I just think you'd have to get to know him to really understand."

"He can be a dick," Todoroki pointed out.

"Stop it Shoto! I'm trying to do something here!" Midoriya pinned the lord with a glare.

"And what's that?" Togaru asked, guarded.

Midoriya sighed and tried to find the right words. "Kacchan is difficult, Your Highness. He's loud and abrasive. But he never settles for good enough. He holds everyone around him to near impossible standards, but he expects the same from himself. He's not content with the life he has. He has no challenge in his life. He needs to be with someone who can give him that

challenge in every aspect of his life. And if your reputation can be trusted, you two are similar. You could bring out the best in each other, I think."

"Or the worst," Todoroki pointed out.

But Midoriya ignored him and gave Togaru a smile. "I had hoped you would at least give him a chance."

"He bullied you," Todoroki pointed out, "why are you doing this for him?"

Midoriya turned to him. "Yes, he did when we were kids. He hasn't for years though. And I'm happy, Shoto," he smiled as he took the Lord's hands. "I want him to be happy too."

"You say he's intelligent, and abrasive," Togaru looked out across the crowd to where Bakugo had his head thrown back in laughter at something one of the other Lords was saying.

Midoriya nodded with a frown. "He's not normally like that." He began muttering to himself, though he wasn't so quiet that Togaru couldn't hear him. "He must've smoked some of the gardener's plants. It wouldn't be the first time. But Sero skipped out on the ball with Ashido so they wouldn't get chosen. He doesn't smoke before going to see her. Unless Kacchan smoked by himself. Or if the cookies on the counter were from Sero..."

"Right," Togaru cleared his throat. "Please excuse me."

He didn't seem to notice though. He just kept muttering. "That girl he's with could be to blame-"

"He'll be doing this for a while," Todoroki told him.



Togaru walked away confused by the Midoriya fellow. Who thought aloud like that where anyone could hear those thoughts and weaponize them? Some things he said stuck out. That Sero—was that his name?—avoided the ball with some girl. How many had done the same? Technically that was breaking the law, but it was more of a symbolic law which meant it was written as a law but was never actually enforced. It may have been enforced in the past, but it wouldn't be while he was around. He didn't want to take anyone's partner away from them.

The other thing that caught his attention was Midoriya insinuating the bombshell Camie could have something to do with Bakugo's strange behaviour. The fact that this supposedly was not how he typically behaved intrigued Togaru. Sure that was the case with everyone here, he presumed. But this Midoriya seemed confused like he'd never seen this behaviour before. Everyone else here had perfected their facades. Was Bakugo putting on an act to catch his eye or was something else afoot?

He made his way to Jirou and Yaoyorozu and with each time he got stopped by someone wanting to talk to him, his patience grew thinner. All he wanted was to figure out what Midoriya meant and to gather intel. Even as he talked to the girls, people tried to interrupt to get him to dance with them. The only one he was going to dance with was his intended Consort and so far that was looking like Rin.

Sometimes Togaru hated having to be polite and respectful when declining all their advances. He just wanted to yell and give them a boot to the face. In the end, he excused himself from Jirou and Yaoyorozu before someone else interrupted and caused him to act on those impulses. His new friends didn't have any real information to give him anyway, so he made his way back to the dias with a drink for Rin and himself.



It was a few minutes to midnight when Bakugo approached the dias where Togaru was sitting with Rin.

"Bakugo," Togaru kept his expression guarded, years of learning to school his features in situations like these. "To what do I owe the pleasure?"

"I just wanted to see your cute face again, Your Highness." His voice was smooth as velvet and nice to listen to.

Kamakiri didn't buy it. He was used to dealing with fake people and he could spot one a mile away. Hope had caught in his chest after hearing Midoriya's words that he might find something redeeming about Bakugo, but it was short lived when he opened his mouth. Midoriya had to be mistaken if he thought the man in front of him had any sort of depth.

"My handsome face?" He asked with an arched brow. Togaru opened his mouth to dismiss him but the tolling of the clock tower bell cut him off. Midnight had struck and that meant the night was finally going to start slowly winding down.

Conversation halted every hour in the castle, as the bell was so loud that words couldn't be heard over them. Despite that, in between the tolling, he picked up on something odd that Camie was saying.

"Uh oh," Camie muttered under her breath before a nervous laugh escaped her. "Come on Bakugo, we gotta go. Peace out Princey."

Bakugo pouted and it was cuter than Togaru had been prepared for. "He's ignored me all night but talked to Deku. I'm not done here."

"We really gotta go, Bakugo!"

"But—"

As the twelfth chime rang out, Togaru noticed something strange about this Bakugo guy. His eyes, which had been warm and hazy, immediately sharpened and narrowed. They flashed with rage and fire as he turned his head slowly to Camie. His charming smile was gone and in its place was an ugly snarl. The pitch of his voice deepened, a borderline demonic rasp in its place. "When I catch you, I'm gonna rip your little bug wings right out of your back. And then I'm gonna tear your limbs off one at a time and beat you with them."

Rin let out a quiet gasp of horror but Togaru leaned forward, fascinated by the turn of events. So this is what Midoriya meant by him acting strange. The facade was gone and he was already liking this version of the man much better.

Togaru didn't know what he meant by bug wings until large, beautiful wings sprouted from Camie's back. Gasps were heard around the room and from Togaru himself. He'd seen some things in his life that he couldn't explain—a man whose shadow seemed almost birdlike and didn't behave like most shadows; or the girl he swore he saw hover in the air for a brief moment. But this was something else. He'd never seen anyone sprout wings before. He probably should've done something, but he was mesmerized.

Camie immediately took to the air, no doubt to escape the angry man who hadn't stopped yelling. Bakugo was fast though and immediately grabbed onto her dress. He tried to climb up her body as they took to the air, no doubt to deliver on his threat.

"Come down here so I can kill you!"

"You agreed to the spell!"

"You were supposed to give me better clothes than shitty Deku and make sure I got here! That was it! Some fucking Fairy Godmother you are!"

"It's your own fault I had to bippity boppity boo your ass to get a decent personality!" She shrieked and tried shaking him off. "I just wanted Princey to see you and not hear anything that comes out of your mouth that's you and make him run away. "

"The fuck is wrong with what comes out of my mouth?"

Camie stopped flapping her wings hard for a moment to give him a level look. "Oh gee, let me think."

The prince tried to remain straight faced. When Bakugo walked in, he was one of the most gorgeous men Togaru ever laid eyes on, but that was nothing compared to how he looked with

crazy, burning eyes and nearly foaming at the mouth. The expletives from the raging blond were some of the most vulgar and creative he'd ever heard and Togaru couldn't help but laugh. He'd never truly appreciated someone he barely knew like this. Bakugo was different, however.

Bakugo took the moment to grab at her wings and Camie zoomed towards the throne. Guards prepared to defend but Togaru waved them down. They weren't coming at him, he just happened to be in the direction they were going.

"I was trying to help you!" Camie yelled. "He wasn't supposed to see you like this! Don't you remember what I told you?"

"Be gay and do crimes!"

"No! Well yes, but twelve bells and your ass is grass . Dammit Bakugo, let go!"

"This is exactly what I'd expect from Kacchan." Midoriya didn't speak loudly, but the room was silent enough as they watched everything unfold that his words, and the affection with which he said them, could be heard.

"Shut up, you little twerp before I kill you too!"

"This was starting to be like that tale of the scullery maid who showed up late to a ball and ended up marrying the prince," Rin told Togaru quietly, his tone dry. "Though I would've expected this Bakugo to have an evil stepsister, not be the evil stepsister."

But Togaru was barely listening to him, too busy watching the commotion with an amused smile on his face. The clamour and clatter as well the shrieks from the guests as Camie nearly fell from the air alerted the Queen Regent to the goings on which caused her to whisk into the ballroom, gasping at the sight before her.

Camie was still flying through the air, whacking Bakugo on the head with her hands to try and get him off as he hung off of her, still trying to climb her so he could grab for her wings.

"What in tarnation?" She asked, clearly confused and appalled by the drastic change of events.

"Mother, I have chosen who I wish to marry." Togaru told her without looking.

The Queen looked at Rin, who was still sitting gracefully next to her son. She smiled at the young man. "Have you indeed? What might his name be?"

Togaru glanced up and followed her gaze and a future with Rin flashed before his eyes.

It was quiet and peaceful, even a little romantic. Rin with a cup of tea in his hands standing on the balcony of their room. The waning light of sunset dancing across the wall as Togaru came up behind him to hold him as they looked upon their sleepy, happy kingdom. It would be a nice life full of warmth and comfort. Rin's gentleness and quiet strength could enrich his life in so many ways. But that life would eventually give way to boredom.

He turned his gaze back to the man who had caught his eye the moment he saw him. "Bakugo." Togaru could barely keep the smile off of his face before pointing across the room to the flying fairy and the feral gremlin who wasn't about to let her get away with anything. Her shaking had knocked him loose, but he clung to Camie's dress with his teeth. "That one."

The Queen turned slowly, hoping her son wasn't pointing where she thought he was. Sure enough, he was.

Seeing the royal family looking at him, Bakugo started climbing up her again and spit out the part of her dress he had in his teeth while he growled. "What the hell are you looking at?!" He shouted before tightening his grip as she did more somersaults in the air trying to shake him loose.

"Y-You're sure about this?" The Queen asked, hoping the prince was just playing around.

He nearly had hearts in his eyes as he watched the catastrophe unfold before him. "I'm sure. He's the one."

Her sigh was quiet before she addressed the guests. "Enough!" The Queen Regent's voice was loud, clear, and firm. When she had everyone's attention, she addressed Camie and Bakugo first. "The two of you, come down from there and follow me. And our other honoured guests, our deepest apologies for this disturbance. Please, drink and dance!"

Camie looked sheepish as she followed the Queen Regent. Bakugo looked at them and curled his lip in a snarl as he approached. Togaru didn't hide the fact that he was looking at him, enjoying the contradiction from his earlier behaviour.

Togaru was growled at, but he caught the way the blond's chest puffed up. If he didn't know any better, he'd think Bakugo was preening under his attention. He knew they were supposed to follow the Queen Regent. Not to would be a clear defiance to the crown. In front of so many people could be disastrous.

Yet as Bakugo walked past him to follow the Queen Regent, Togaru reached out and grabbed his hand.

"What the-?"

"Dance with me." Togaru pulled him towards the floor where only moments before, Bakugo had been flying around above. He expected yelling, or some sort of resistance, but Bakugo went with him. He also didn't hesitate as they put their hands in a position that would allow them to switch who led the dance midway through.

The pair started moving as if music was still playing, as though the musicians hadn't stopped playing when the chaos unfolded. Almost immediately they started up with a slow waltz. They were the only ones on the floor for a good portion of the song, but neither noticed as Togaru started a quiet conversation.

"So you agreed to be placed under a magic spell so you could see my cute face ?"

"It ain't like that!" Bakugo snapped. "I didn't want to go. But she showed up out of nowhere and started showing me all this magic stuff she could do. She told me I could one up Deku if I went and if I let her help me."

"Deku? That's Midoriya, I take it?"

"Ugh no shit. You've talked to him so you should know that already."

"We weren't talking about him," Togaru said to him and caught the way Bakugo scowled harder to keep the smile off of his face.

They moved in circles around the floor, oblivious to the other couples joining in. "You just trusted a self proclaimed Fairy Godmother to not use you as she saw fit for her own gain?"

"I didn't think she'd make me look like some lame ass starry eyed school freak," Bakugo scoffed and Togaru immediately laughed, though he quickly did his best to hide it. But it was too late, he'd been heard and Bakugo spent the rest of the dance making smart assed comments trying to get another laugh out of him.

As the song came to an end, Bakugo nodded in the direction of the dias where the Queen Regent stood, her expression closed off and tight lipped. Togaru knew she was mad and Bakugo could see it too.

"How much shit are we in?"

"Depends," Togaru admitted.

"On?"

"Your interest in being my Consort."

Bakugo's grin was feral, Togaru was starting to think that was just how his face usually looked. Under a spell, he could smile properly, but on his own it was like all he knew was to bare all of his teeth. "Fine, whatever. But it's just so everyone here knows that I'm the best."

Like Togaru was expected to believe that. He was going to be in more trouble than he'd ever known in his life. He knew that he could handle it though. Just like he was able to handle the pressures of ruling the kingdom. Handling Bakugo every day was going to be a challenge and Togaru couldn't wait for it to begin.











# Midoriya and the Beast

A *Beauty & the Beast* AU by QweenBee in collaboration with Kursket (left)  
Content Warning: Female Midoriya Izuku (Genderbending)

Once upon a time, there lived a king who presided over France. He was famed for victories in war, but the mentality of a warlord made him a poor husband and father. Those who knew him personally saw his cold heart, and their own hearts withered in the chill.

As his sons grew older, each was granted a castle of their own and ruled over provincial sections of France. By the time his youngest son was old enough to rule, the boy had grown intensely bitter and resented everything his father stood for. He despised the halls of the castle the king had built for him, and the servants who lived in his castle suffered for it.

Few had heard of the prince when, on a dreadfully cold and stormy night, a beggar woman appeared at the castle gates. Her appearance was haggard, made even worse by the elements. She was met by the prince himself at the door, who demanded to know her business.

The woman begged for one night of shelter while the storm passed. In return, she offered the prince a single rose.

When the prince laughed at her request, the woman clicked her tongue at him and warned him that not all was as it appeared. Still, the prince turned her away, looking upon her with scorn and disgust.

Before his eyes, the beggar woman transformed and became a beautiful enchantress, dark locks curling past her shoulders and tired eyes full of wisdom.

"There is fire guarding the ice in your heart..." she murmured, casting a spell on the prince and leaving him with the rose. Flames engulfed him first, then ice crept along his skin, crackling and giving him a horrifying appearance.

"You have no love for anyone in this world. If you cannot learn to love and be loved in return by the time the last petal falls from that rose, you will remain a beast forever. Be grateful I picked that rose today, boy."

"Enchantress, please," he begged, "I didn't know!"

Enraged by the prince's words, the enchantress cast a bright light over the whole castle, cursing everyone inside it. They all became mere objects for use by the prince, teakettles and broomsticks.

"You had best get to work, prince. If you do not succeed, the servants living in your castle will remain cursed as well."

With that, she whisked away into the night, leaving the prince to howl into the rain.

Many years passed, and when none heard from the prince, most assumed he had perished. Some simply forgot about him. For those who lived in the small provincial town he ruled over, word of his rule hadn't travelled quickly enough, so it was as if he didn't exist.

Among the residents of this poor town lived a young woman, Izuku Midoriya, and her mother, Inko. Inko was an inventor who had moved a great distance, hoping to find inspiration, somewhere to converse with intellectuals and practice her talent. The town they lived in was far from intellectual, but it was only a day's travel from Paris, where she frequently made trips.

Izuku had grown since the day they came to the town, and she had earned the nickname "Belle" for her beauty. None in town could touch her, from dark, curly locks that would glint a deep green in the light, to her fair skin and classically beautiful features. However, she took after her mother. The townsfolk admired her beauty, yet none understood how she could waste her beauty with her nose stuck in a book all day.

On a morning like every other, Belle made her way into town, intent on visiting the lone bookstore. The shop owner, a tall, dark haired woman, greeted her just as she had every other morning.

"Bonjour, Belle!"

"Bonjour, Yaomomo," she sighed, the fond nickname coming easily. "I finished the book I borrowed! Got anything new this morning?"

"Well, goodness, not since yesterday!"

"Oh, that's alright. Let's see..."

Belle only browsed the shelves for a brief moment before snagging one of her favorites, a tale of a lady and a prince in disguise.

"That one again, Belle? My, you must've read that seven times by now!"

"I can't help it!" she giggled. "It's my favorite! Daring sword fights, magic spells..."

"If you like it all that much, it's yours."

"But madam—!"

"I insist!"

"Ah, okay, thank you! Thank you very much!"

Belle left the shop with her heart full, already browsing the pages of her new book as she weaved through the busy morning traffic. She was nearly home when she saw a terribly familiar face, followed by his ever-present companion.



"Hello, Belle!" Katsuki's voice boomed. He was, according to some, Belle's counterpart. With a chiseled chin, fair blond locks, and muscles that made the lumberjack pale in comparison, Katsuki was sure to make any woman envious of whoever he chose to be his wife. However, his temper was atrocious, and Belle was confident the only time he'd ever touched a book in his life was when he was taking them from her.

"Bonjour, Katsuki..." she sighed, watching the man snatch her book like he had many times before. "May I have my book back?"

The blond man ignored her request and instead started flipping through the pages of her book, brows drawn in a mix of confusion and some kind of disgust. "Why are there no pictures? Why would you even try to read something like this?"

"Well, some people use their imaginations," Belle explained.

"Tch. How foolish," Katsuki huffed, tossing the book into the mud. "Belle, it's about time you got your head out of those books and paid attention to more important things, like marriage. You know the whole town's talking about it; it's not right for a woman to read. Soon, she starts getting ideas... and thinking."

"Katsuki, you're positively primeval."

Katsuki puffed out his chest and smirked. "Thank you, Belle. Why don't you let me take you over to the tavern? We can have a look at my hunting trophies."

"Maybe some other time," Belle said, doing her best to clean the mud off her book. "I really need to head home. My mother needs help today."

For the first time, Katsuki's shorter companion spoke up. Eijirou Kirishima was an odd-looking man himself, with unusually sharp teeth and wild black hair. He snorted a laugh and elbowed Katsuki knowingly.

"That crazy old loon, she needs all the help she can get!"

Belle had been doing her best to retain her composure, but when they both laughed at her mother, she couldn't contain the anger that bubbled up. "Don't you talk about my mother that way!"

As if he had a sudden change of heart, Katsuki growled and smacked Eijirou upside the head. "Yeah, don't talk about her mother that way!"

The sound of an engine backfiring abruptly halted the conversation. It could have only come from the Midoriyas' cottage at the top of the hill. Belle happily took the out and ran off, worried her mother was about to set the house on fire. She could hear the laughter behind her, but it hardly mattered in that moment.

"Mama?" she called, descending into a smoky cellar. When she could see, it was evident that Inko's most recent invention was giving her a hard time; Inko herself was stuck underneath broken pieces of a contraption that even Belle didn't fully understand. Belle was quick to her side, helping the woman to her feet.

"Now, how did that happen? I was certain I had it right..."

"Are you alright, Mama?"

"Fine, fine... but I'm about to give up on this hunk of junk," she huffed, glaring.

"Mama, you always say that, and you always figure it out anyway. Don't worry, you're going to get this working and win first prize at the fair tomorrow, I just know it." When Inko didn't seem swayed, Belle added, "And you'll become a world famous inventor!"

"You really believe that?"

"I always have," Belle hummed, smiling fondly at her mother.

"Well, let me see what I can do... I bet I can have this thing fixed in no time." Inko was back to work immediately, new determination in her eyes. Belle knew when her mother got frustrated like this, sometimes she simply needed a little morale boost.

It took some time, but Inko was able to get her contraption working, and it turned out to be a log chopper. When they were certain everything worked correctly, Inko hitched up their horse and strapped the machine into the carriage. After fond goodbyes, Inko headed for Paris, where the fair would start in less than a day.

Neither of them knew how long it would be before they saw one another again.



The following day went relatively uneventfully for Belle. With her mother away, she was left to tend the animals, but that was nothing she wasn't used to. Cows and chickens were easy, after all. What *wasn't* easy... was Katsuki.

A knock came at the door as Belle was relaxing with her new book. One glance out of Inko's "peep hole" invention showed Katsuki admiring himself in the reflection of the glass. She sighed and reluctantly opened the door, albeit only a crack.

"Katsuki, what a pleasant... surprise."

Katsuki grinned charmingly and pushed his way into the house, past Belle entirely. "Isn't it? I'm just full of surprises." The blond made his way further into the cottage, tracking mud unwittingly (or, perhaps, he simply didn't care).

"You know, Belle... there's not a girl in town who wouldn't love to be in your shoes. Today's the day. All your dreams are about to come true."

"What do you know about my dreams, Katsuki?"

"Everything," he scoffed, plopping down in her chair and propping his muddy boots up on the same book he'd nearly ruined the day before. "Picture this... a rustic hunting lodge, my latest kill roasting on the fire. My sweet little wife, massaging my feet while the little ones play with the dogs. We'll have six or seven."

The more Katsuki spoke, the more Belle's disgust grew, and the less she was able

to hide it, especially when he kicked off his boots and wiggled his toes through hole-riddled socks. "Um, six or seven... dogs?"

"No, Belle! Strapping boys, like me!"

"Imagine that," she sighed, picking up her book and returning it to the safety of the bookshelf.

"Do you know who that wife will be?" Katsuki rumbled in something of a predatory tone, standing and stalking close to her.

"Let me think..."

"You, Belle," he boomed, boxing her between his arms and the wall.

Belle ducked under Katsuki's arms and slipped away, toward the door. "Katsuki, I'm speechless... I really don't know what to say."

Just as she'd hoped, Katsuki followed, trapping her once again against the door. "Then say you'll marry me."

"I'm very sorry, Katsuki, but I just don't deserve you." Behind her back, Belle twisted the doorknob. Katsuki's full weight on the door pushed it open, and he went tumbling out of the cottage, much to her relief. His muddy boots were quickly thrown out the door as well, and it was only then that she realized Katsuki had a whole band outside waiting. She rolled her eyes and slammed the door, locking it firmly behind her.

Despite his usually stubborn nature, it seemed Katsuki gave up on his endeavor rather quickly. Before long, Belle was peeking outside, relieved to see little trace of Katsuki or his entourage.

"Can you imagine?" she huffed, speaking more to the chickens than anyone else as she went about the evening chores. "He asked *me* to marry him. Me, the wife of that boorish, brainless... ugh! No sir, not me. I want much more than this provincial life! I want... adventure in the great wide somewhere!"

Belle was rambling now, a habit she'd picked up during her mother's many trips into Paris.

"You know, for once, it might be grand to have someone understand... I want so much more than they've got planned!"

Her thoughts took her out into the field, but as soon as she stepped out of the barn, she stopped cold. At the edge of the woods was their horse, running full speed toward the house and looking more frightened than Belle had ever seen him. The carriage was still behind him, but Inko was nowhere to be seen.

"Hey, hey, steady! Where... where's Mama? Oh no, what happened? Please, Philippe, take me to her!"

The chickens and Inko's invention were forgotten. Belle unhitched the carriage and rode off, hoping against hope that Phillipe could retrace his steps.



"No, Mama, I'm not leaving you!"

Neither of them had noticed the heavy shadow creeping behind Belle, not until the creature it belonged to snarled and whipped Belle around by a clawed hand on her shoulder. She gasped and lost her grip on her shawl, shivering in the sudden cold of the dungeon.

"What are you doing here?" the creature growled in a man's voice. Belle couldn't see him, just the vague silhouette of what appeared to be a large man.

"Wh-who's there? Who are you?"

"I'm the master of this castle," the voice rumbled.

"I've only come for my mother. Please, let her out! Can't you see she's sick?"

"Then she shouldn't have trespassed here."

"But she could die! Please, I'll do anything!" Belle begged.

"There's nothing you can do. She's my prisoner."

"There must be something... wait! Take... take me instead."

The room fell silent. The man seemed to consider Belle's words.

"You would take her place?" he grumbled.

"Izuku, no!" Inko cried. "You don't know what you're doing!"

Belle ignored her mother's protests. "If I stay... will you let her go?"

"Yes. But you must promise to stay here forever."

Once again, the room fell quiet as Belle thought. Her mother would surely die if she was left in these conditions for too long... but then, she had no idea who she was dealing with. The hand on her shoulder had felt cold, almost like ice, but that voice didn't sound far off from human.

"Come into the light," she asked softly.

With reluctance, the creature took a step forward. The only light in the room came from a hole in the roof where moonlight streamed in. In the pale light of the moon, the nature of the beast was revealed. He was a horrible creature; black ice rippled across his skin, and the hair on his head was mottled red and white. The small amount of human-looking skin on his face was as white as snow, and most of his body was shrouded in a cloak, as if he was trying to hide it.

Belle's heart sank into her stomach, eyes growing wider until she could bear to look no more. She dropped her face into her hands, shrinking back closer to her mother, as close as she could through the bars.

"Izuku, please," Inko whispered, "I can't let you do this!"

She took a deep breath. This was for her mother. She didn't have another choice.



Slowly, she stood tall, giving the beast a resolute look.

"You have my word."

"Done!"

The beast moved quickly, unlocking the cell door with a kind of urgency. Belle collapsed under the weight of what she'd done, head in her hands to hide her tears. Inko was holding her close the moment she was able, sobbing openly.

"No, please, listen to me, Izuku. I'm old, I've lived my life!"

There was hardly any time for goodbyes. Before Belle could properly say anything to her mother, the beast was dragging her off, down the stairs of the great tower. No matter how Belle cried behind him, there was nothing either her or her mother could do.

Through the window of the cell, Belle watched as her mother was thrown into what appeared to be a palanquin. The legs of the thing broke free from the ivy and began to move on their own, and while normally she would've marvelled at how such a thing was achieved, now wasn't the time. She slumped against the wall and sobbed, mind racing and heart aching. Would she ever see her mother again? Likely not, and she hadn't even had a chance to properly say goodbye. What a cruel captor... what would she do if the rest of her days in this forsaken castle were like this?

Down the hall, Belle heard faint voices. It sounded like the voices she heard before, on the way up the tower. She paid them no mind. She couldn't stop crying, let alone strain to hear what was being said.

The beast appeared in the cell doorway, and Belle looked up at him with all the hurt she felt in her chest.

"You didn't even let me say goodbye. I'll never see her again, and I didn't get to say goodbye."

He seemed to think for a moment, and a look of what she could only imagine was guilt crossed over his face. "Let me show you to your room."

Belle blinked, wiping tears away from her eyes. "M-my room? I thought..."

"You *want* to stay in the tower?"

"N-No."

"Then follow me."

Walking through the castle halls was no less scary with a light. The beast held a candelabra to light their way, and the shadows it cast across the horrifying statues in the castle made them even more spooky. Belle couldn't help the silent tears still flowing slowly.

After some silence, the beast spoke up in a rumbling voice. "I, um... hope you like

it here. The castle is your home now. You can go anywhere you like except for the West Wing."

Belle's curiosity got the best of her. "What's in the West Wing?"

"It's forbidden," the beast growled quickly, stopping and shooting her a threatening glare.

She bit the inside of her lip, cursing herself for gaining such courage. After a moment, however, the beast continued down a long hallway and to a lone room with exquisite furniture. Belle was certain she'd never seen anything so lavish in her life, and yet... her heart still sat so heavy in her chest, fear prickling along her skin.

"If you need anything, my servants will attend to you," the beast murmured in an odd tone. Belle thought perhaps he was trying to sound concerned. He hesitated, then continued, "You will... join me for dinner. That's not a request."

He slammed the door, causing Belle to jump and lose what little grip she had on herself. She ran to the bed and flung herself onto it, terrified of the implications of dinner with such a creature, let alone what could follow dinner.



Back in Belle's poor provincial town, Eijirou had gathered half the town in the tavern, hoping a celebration may help Katsuki feel better in the face of rejection.

"Who the hell does she think she is?" the blond huffed, stomping away from the crowd to sit in front of the fire. "That girl has tangled with the wrong man. No one says 'no' to Katsuki Bakugou."

Eijirou followed and sighed; there wasn't much to be done when Katsuki started going off like this, especially not once he'd had a drink.

"Rejected, publicly humiliated. It's more than I can bear."

"More beer, Kats?"

"What for?! I'm disgraced. I'll only make myself look worse."

"Who, you?" Eijirou boxed Katsuki into his seat with hands on the arms of the chair. "Never. Kats, you've got to pull yourself together! It disturbs me to see you looking so down in the dumps."

Eijirou brought his fingers to the corners of Katsuki's lips and forced the man to smile. Katsuki, in turn, punched him in the face.

"Hey! You know every guy here'd love to be you, Katsuki, even when taking your lumps."

Katsuki turned his chair away from Eijirou, but the shorter man only followed him.

"There's no man in town as admired as you! You're everyone's favorite guy!"

Despite his stature, Eijirou was strong; he turned Katsuki's chair back toward the bar with little effort.

"Everyone's awed and inspired by you... *and it's not very hard to see why!*"

"Eijirou, are you singing? What the fuck?"

"Huh? Was I?"

Lined up near the bar, three ladies caught Katsuki's eye for the first time. On second glance, however, he realized only one of them was a lady. Two of the people in dresses were guys he sometimes practiced target shooting with. They were all sighing dreamily at him.

"What the hell is happening here?"

"I... don't know," Eijirou coughed, turning to scrub a light blush off his face. "But, um, you get my point, man! You're the most popular guy in town. You've got girls lined up waiting for your proposal."

Katsuki didn't miss the way Eijirou seemed to stutter at the end of his statement, but he couldn't focus on it, so he filed it away for later. "But if I'm the best—and I AM the best—I deserve the best girl."

"You mean Belle? Sure, she's pretty, I guess, but what does it matter? What kind of housewife would she make with her nose stuck in a book all day? You deserve better than her!"

"Better? Who could possibly be better?"

Before Eijirou had a chance to respond, Inko burst into the tavern, lips blue and tears frozen to her lashes.

"Help! Someone, please help!" she cried. "He's got my Izuku! He's got her locked in a dungeon!"

"Oi, slow down, Inko," Katsuki huffed, "who's got Belle locked in a dungeon?"

"A beast! A horrible, monstrous beast!"

A few in the crowd managed to suppress laughter into snorts. The rest were laughing freely.

"Is it a big beast?"

"Huge!"

"With a long, ugly snout?"

"Hideously ugly!"

"And sharp, cruel fangs?"

"Yes, yes," she gasped, terror in her eyes as she looked back up to Katsuki. "Will you help me?"

"You will? Oh, thank you, thank you!"

"Imagine that! A beast!"

"Crazy old Inko... she's always good for a laugh."

"Crazy old Inko, huh?" Katsuki hummed, brows furrowed. "Crazy old Inko... Kirishima, I'm afraid I've been thinking."

"A dangerous pastime," Eijirou chuckled.

"I know... but that wacky old coot is Belle's mother, and her sanity's only so-so. Now, the wheels in my head have been turning since I saw that loony old woman. See, I promised myself I'd be married to Belle, and *right now I'm evolving a plan!*"



Katsuki gathered the front of Eijirou's shirt and pulled him close, whispering into his ear. The black haired man raised an eyebrow at Katsuki.

"You really think that'll work?"

"It's foolproof!"

"Then I'll... wait, Katsuki, were you singing just then?"

"... what? What the fuck is going on around here?!"

Outside the tavern, Inko wandered the vacant town square, shivering once again in the cold.

"Will no one help me...?"



Belle had lost track of time. Her heart was broken at the thought of never seeing her mother again, let alone being forced to live in this forsaken castle. Only the sound of a soft 'clink' at her bedroom door brought her out of her misery.

"Who is it?" she called, shuffling closer to the door.

"Mrs. Potts, dear," a voice called back. When Belle opened the door, however, there wasn't anyone there... until she looked down. The tea set that appeared abandoned was talking to her!

"I thought you might like a spot of tea," the teapot, Mrs. Potts, said.

"B-but... you're a..." Belle stuttered, backing away from the cart that was rolling itself into her room. She stopped abruptly when she bumped into the great wardrobe that stood next to her bed, and it, too, came to life.

"Ooh! Careful!"

"This is impossible..." she muttered to herself, sitting on one end of the bed to keep her quivering knees from collapsing. Shortly after, the air left her lungs when the wardrobe suddenly leaned her side against the other end of the bed.

"It seems impossible, but here we are!" she laughed.

"I told you she was pretty, Mama," spoke the teacup her tea was being poured into. Belle blushed softly and shifted, settling with her legs to her side on the bed.

"All right now, Kota, that'll do," Mrs. Potts chuckled. The teacup, who Belle guessed must be Kota, hopped over to her, clearly doing his best not to spill any tea.

"Thank you," Belle hummed, picking up the teacup, who was puffing his cheeks out and blowing air into her tea to make bubbles. Mrs. Potts simply shook her head at him.

"Feel free to call me Ochako, by the way," Mrs. Potts piped up, a sweet smile on her face.

"Ahh, I'm Izuku. I take it this is Kota?"

"Call me Chip!" the little teacup huffed, pouting up at her.

"Yes, that's dear Chip," the wardrobe chuckled, "and you can just call me Mei!"

"Thank you all for your hospitality..." Izuku murmured, holding back tears once more.

"Of course," Ochako said. "That was a very brave thing you did, my dear."

"We all think so," Mei agreed.

"But... I've lost my mother, my dreams... everything."

"Cheer up, honey, it'll turn out alright in the end. You'll see." Ochako offered her a kind smile, then startled with a small gasp. "Oh, listen to me, jabbering on while



there's supper to get on the table. Chip, let's go!"

Chip, now mostly empty, hopped back onto the tea cart, which was quickly whisked away. Izuku could only assume they were off to the kitchen.

"Well now, what should we dress you in for dinner?" Mei was upright once more, rummaging through her own drawers and cabinets. "What about this? You'll look ravishing in this one!" She held up a pink dress that was admittedly gorgeous.

"That's very kind of you, but I'm not going to dinner."

"Oh, but you must!"

Before Izuku could reply, a new servant, this time a clock, waddled into her room. "Ahem... dinner is served."

"I'm not coming," Izuku huffed, polite yet dismissive.

"I—I see... I will inform the master."

Less than five minutes later, something thumped loudly against the door. It sounded suspiciously like a paw.

"I thought I told you to come down to dinner," the beast growled through the door.

"I'm not hungry," she called back in the same dismissive tone.

"You come out, or I'll... I'll break down the door!"

Izuku wasn't about to respond to that. She could hear muffled conversation from behind the door before Beast raised his voice just a touch.

"Will you come down to dinner?"

"No!"

"It would give me great pleasure... if you would join me for dinner. ... please."

"No, thank you."

"You can't stay in there forever," he yelled.

"Yes I can!" she yelled right back.

"Fine! Then you can go ahead and STARVE!" he roared. Faintly, she could hear him ordering his servants not to let her leave the room, but she wasn't really listening anymore. The beast's outburst had frightened her more than she let on in the moment. She hugged her knees close and startled slightly when Mei spoke next to her.

"Easy, dear... why don't you just go down for dinner?"

"You heard him. He's so... so angry when he doesn't get his way."

"But the master's not so bad once you get to know him. Why don't you give him a chance?"

"I don't want to get to know him. I don't want to have anything to do with him!"

Mei looked somehow crestfallen, in a way Izuku hadn't known a wardrobe could look crestfallen. She left Izuku alone after that, correctly assuming she needed some space.

It was hours later when Izuku's stomach finally prompted her to quietly step out of her room. It seemed no one was watching her door, so she moved as silently as she could. Down the stairs they'd ascended to find her room, she could hear voices, some of which she recognized. It didn't sound like the Beast was around, however, so she followed the sound.

When Izuku found the kitchen, it looked as though she'd interrupted a conversation. The clock who'd come to fetch her earlier spoke in a pitch too loud for the room.

"Splendid to see you out and about, mademoiselle! I am Tenya, head of the household." He bowed slightly to her and reached for her hand, but before she could give it to him, a candelabra burst into the room and slid between them to take her hand.

"This is Yuga," Tenya sighed.

"En chante, cherie," Yuga purred, kissing her hand.

"If there's anything that we can do to make your stay more comfortable, mademoiselle..." Tenya said distractedly, struggling to shove Yuga out of the way.

"Well, I am a little hungry..."

Immediately, the kitchen came to life. The fire on the stove roared, and all the drawers opened as silverware stood at attention. The servants ushered Izuku into the dining room, urgently chattering among themselves. It seemed the servants had been without a guest to entertain for far too long.

Despite how the evening started, the dinner Izuku was served was phenomenal. The servants went to great lengths to entertain her, and everything was absolutely delicious. She couldn't help but laugh and applaud all their hard work.

"Bravo," she cheered when she was finished, "that was wonderful!"

"Thank you, mademoiselle," Tenya chuckled, smiling proudly until he looked down at the clock on his face. "Oh, my goodness, look at the time. Now, off to bed!"

"Oh, I couldn't possibly go to bed now! It's my first time in an enchanted castle."

"Enchanted?" Tenya squeaked. "Who said it was enchanted? It was you, Yuga, wasn't it?"

Yuga, who had just hopped closer, held up his hands innocently. "Non, it wasn't me!"

"I actually figured it out for myself..." Izuku laughed sheepishly. "I'd like to have a

look around, if that's alright."

"Oh! Would you like a tour?"

"Wait a second, Yuga, I'm not sure that's such a good idea."

Izuku smiled and poked at Tenya's belly, which, to her surprise, squished under her finger. "Perhaps you could take me. I'm sure you know everything there is to know about the castle."

"Well, actually, ah... yes, I do!"

Yuga simply smiled and waved them off.

The tour itself turned out to be rather boring; Tenya seemed proud of his knowledge, and he prattled on endlessly about the architecture of the castle. Izuku found she didn't mind, however. It looked as though everything in the castle really was alive, if the way the heads on the suits of armor all turned to follow her was any evidence.

Her attention only strayed from Tenya when her eyes landed on the grand staircase in the main hall of the castle. She had only ever been up the east wing, not the west wing. Curiosity got the better of her, and she found her feet moving of their own accord, taking her up the right set of stairs.

Halfway up the stairs, Tenya jumped in front of Izuku, having noticed she'd strayed from his tour.

"Ah, mademoiselle?"

"What's up there?"

"Where? There? Oh, nothing. Absolutely nothing of interest at all in the west wing. Dusty, dull, very boring."

"Ah, so that's the west wing..." Izuku murmured. "I wonder what he's hiding up there..."

"Hiding? The master is hiding nothing!"

"Then it wouldn't be forbidden." She stepped over the clock with ease, but he scurried further up the stairs and blocked her path once again.

"Perhaps mademoiselle would like to see something else? We have exquisite tapestries dating all the way back to..."

"Maybe later," Izuku said dismissively, once again stepping over Tenya.

"Uh, the gardens, or—or the library, perhaps!"

That had Izuku stopping in her tracks. "You have a library?"

"Oh yes! There's books! Mountains of books! Come, come, I'll show you!"

Tenya happily scampered off down the staircase and into a hallway. Izuku started

to follow before she realized this was maybe the only opportunity she'd get. Tenya had disappeared and left her alone... so once again, she scaled the staircase.

Excitement filled her veins, but it was slowly replaced by creeping, icy dread. It looked like this place had been deeply neglected by the servants, so different from how sparkling clean the rest of the castle was. Glass littered the floor where a mirror had been smashed. A door at the end of the hallway was cracked open slightly, and despite the heavy feeling in her gut, Izuku reached forward and stepped inside fully.

The inside of the room could only be described as a lair. Furniture had been smashed and broken, paintings on the wall were slashed and destroyed. One caught her eye, a painting of what appeared to be a handsome prince with oddly shaded hair. He looked like he might have white patches in his hair, like a poor beggar she'd once seen in the streets of Paris. She never got to get a good look, though. Her attention moved quickly from one thing to the next before it landed on the only well-preserved part of the room.

In the center of the room was a small table that held a bell jar. Underneath the jar was a single glimmering rose. After what she'd seen in the rest of the castle, she could only assume it was enchanted, too. Gently, she lifted the bell jar, exposing the rose. It looked so tender, and it clashed so thoroughly with the rest of the room. Perhaps...

Izuku's fingers extended, intending to just brush the rose and sate her curiosity, but they never met petals. A shadow crossed the room from the balcony, followed by deep growling. She gasped, but before she could react, massive, clawed hands were slamming the jar back over the rose. She looked up to meet beady, mismatched eyes and a heavy scowl.

"Why did you come here?" the beast growled.

"I-I'm sorry."

"I warned you never to come here!"

"I didn't mean any harm," she tried, voice shaking.

"Do you realize what you could have done?!"

The beast thrashed, throwing a broken piece of furniture clear across the room in his rage. Izuku shrank away toward the door.

"Please, stop!"

"*GET OUT!*" the beast howled.

Izuku couldn't do this. She turned tail and ran the whole way out, down the hallway, down the stairs, and to the front entrance, where her cloak hung on a hook. Yuga called after her, but she couldn't stop. She hastily wrapped herself up and ran out the front door into the cold.

Blessedly, the servants had tied off her horse and fed him grains. Phillipe was

ready and waiting when she raced into the snow. Shaking fingers untied his lead, and with little effort, they were galloping off into the forest and away from the enchanted castle.

The forest only grew darker the further away they got, and they didn't make it far before the horse whined and came to a complete stop. A pack of wolves had found them, and they were starting to surround the pair. Quickly, Izuku yanked the reins and led Phillipe away, off in the opposite direction.

They travelled as quickly as they could, and for a moment, it seemed perhaps that they could shake the wolves and get away safely. It was only when Phillipe ran across a frozen lake that they met trouble. The ice caved underneath them, providing an opportunity for the wolves to catch up and surround them once on dry land. Izuku had a plan, but before she could act, Phillipe bucked and threw her off, wrapping his reins around a branch in the process. She looked around for something, anything to fight back with, but there was nothing, just her and the wolves. This was the end.

Suddenly, a hulking mass of beast burst from the trees, snarling and swiping at the wolves. All the wolves immediately lost interest in the horse they'd been attacking, turning to Beast instead. Several jumped at him at the same time, and while some parts of his skin were hardened and iced over, other parts were still fleshy and furry, leaving him open to their sharp teeth and claws.

The fight was a flurry of rage, one Izuku was too terrified to fully follow with her eyes or mind. Everything was spinning, and her heart was still racing in terror. Whether it was five seconds or fifty minutes, she couldn't say, but after some time, Beast managed to chase the pack off. They must have realized this was not a fight they could win.

Bright red patches of snow interrupted the otherwise monochrome forest. Beast looked back to Izuku when all the wolves had fled, and there was something in his eyes she couldn't quite pick out. It was gone just as quickly as he collapsed and passed out in the snow.

"I'm free," she whispered to herself, hesitant for only a moment before moving to free Phillipe. She was about to mount the horse when a wave of guilt washed over her. She couldn't leave. He'd certainly die out here in the snow. Perhaps he was a beast, but Izuku wasn't one to judge whether or not something deserved to live. Plus, he had saved her and sacrificed himself.

With a heavy heart, Izuku wrapped her cloak around the beast and used it to heave his weight up onto Phillipe. They made their way back to the castle in silence; Izuku was too exhausted from a long day to talk to Phillipe like she often did.



When they arrived back at the castle, it took quite a bit of effort to move Beast around. Thankfully, some of the servants were strong and large enough to handle



the task. They carried him to a room with a fireplace and provided both he and Izuku with plenty of blankets and some fresh clothing. They were both soaked and freezing cold by that point.

Beast roused shortly after they got him settled. Izuku was speaking softly with Mrs. Potts when she heard a confused, weak growl. He sounded confused, but he didn't speak, so neither did Izuku.

"Here, now..." she murmured softly after some time, holding a warm, wet cloth. The beast was licking a wound on his arm with a long, oddly canine tongue. "Oh, don't do that."

The beast growled and pulled his arm away, so it took a bit of work to make him hold still for even a moment. When Izuku was finally able to swipe the cloth over the wound, Beast howled out in pain.

"That *hurts!*"

"If you'd hold still, it wouldn't hurt as much."

"Well, if you hadn't run away, this wouldn't have happened!"

"If you hadn't frightened me, I wouldn't have run away!"

"Well... you shouldn't have been in the west wing!"

"Well, you should learn to control your temper!"

Beast raised a hand like he was about to argue, then hung his head when he found no argument. The servants were now all watching Izuku, reemerging from hiding spots they'd fled to when Beast's temper came out.

"Now, hold still," Izuku said firmly, one hand holding Beast's arm and the other holding the rag. "This might sting a little."

As Izuku applied the rag, Beast grunted and gritted his teeth, but there was no ferocity there. He did his best to be patient and let her tend to his wound.

"By the way... thank you for saving my life."

He opened his eyes and blinked at Izuku once before his expression softened. "You're welcome."



Inko was ready. She had packed a full traveler's kit, ready for a long journey without a horse. The blasted carriage that had taken her home returned to the castle before she was ready, so now she'd have to take the journey on foot. She didn't care what it took... she had to rescue her daughter!

A few minutes after Inko left the house, Katsuki and Eijirou showed up at the door, only to find the place seemingly abandoned. Along with them walked a blond man with a wicked smirk who went by the name Neito.

"Belle! Inko!" Katsuki called into the empty residence.

"Katsuki, I don't think they're here."

"Yeah, I can see that, shit for brains."

"I guess it's not gonna work after all, then..."

Katsuki fisted the front of Eijirou's shirt and glared at him. "They have to come back sometime, and when they do, we'll be ready for them." He dragged the shorter man to a spot on the porch and dropped him into a snowdrift. "Eijirou, don't move from that spot until Belle and her mother come home."

"But... what if I..."

"No buts! I'll have Belle as my wife, whether she likes it or not."



"Izuku, there's something I want to show you."

"Hmm? What is it?"

After the Beast saved Izuku and she tended his wounds in return, he had gotten a lot nicer. It seemed like he was really trying to be kind, and some days, it was easy to forget Izuku was a prisoner.

Beast had led her to a door she hadn't been to before. Izuku reached to open it, but a heavy hand stopped her.

"Wait, you have to close your eyes. It's a surprise."

Izuku raised an eyebrow at the beast, but he just grinned excitedly. She couldn't resist when he got excited like that, so she did as he asked and closed her eyes.

Slowly, Beast led them into what seemed to be a dark room.

"Can I open my eyes?"

"No, no. Not yet. Wait here."

From behind Izuku's eyelids, she could tell the room was getting brighter. He must be opening curtains, and there must have been a lot of windows.

"All right... now you can open them."

Izuku opened her eyes and was met with the largest library she'd ever seen in her life. It had to be at least three stories tall, containing a massive collection of books and plenty of cozy reading nooks.

"I can't believe it..." she murmured, happy tears pricking the corners of her eyes. "I've never seen so many books in all my life!"

"You—you like it?"

"It's wonderful..."

"Then it's yours."

Izuku blinked, then beamed at the beast. "Oh, thank you so much!"

Every day seemed to hold something new from then on. Izuku adored the library, but somehow, she enjoyed spending time with the beast more and more, perhaps more than she enjoyed her time in the library.

The inhabitants of the castle truly must have been without human contact for quite some time, and she realized this during one of their first mornings having breakfast together. While she quietly ate her porridge, Beast was tearing into it with no regard for the mess he was making. When he tried to use a spoon, it simply didn't fit in his hand... which led to both of them drinking the porridge from the bowl instead.

Days bled into weeks. Izuku enjoyed feeding the birds during the cold winters, and she couldn't help but laugh when Beast tried to feed them. He was too enthusiastic at first and scared them away, but as soon as Izuku laid his hands flat and told him to be patient, the birds decided they rather liked him, and before they knew it, he was covered in birds.

Sometimes, she swore she could hear the servants muttering excitedly about something, but she could never catch what it was. Usually she was too wrapped up in teaching Beast new things.

At night, Izuku would read to Beast before they retired for the evening. When she discovered he couldn't read, it simply broke her heart, and she decided this would be their routine until Beast felt comfortable enough to start learning. *Romeo and Juliet* was a fast favorite of his, and so they started there.

Izuku was rarely made aware of events the castle staff had planned. Beast liked to surprise her, and since she came from a poor town, she had never seen many of the lavish furnishings the castle held.

The night of the "ball," Izuku only found out when Mei told her she needed to get ready. The wardrobe had just the dress for the occasion, and the servants had worked tirelessly to ensure it fit just right. A coat rack had set about styling her hair, and by the time they were done with her, she had to admit, she looked beautiful.

She had no idea what to expect when she walked down the grand staircase, but it certainly wasn't what she saw. Beast was dressed just as finely, groomed and trimmed with clear care. He looked nervous, but some of the nerves faded when he laid eyes on Izuku. It was more... admiration, then, an innocent kind of sparkle.

Arm in arm, Beast led her to a grand dining room she hadn't seen yet, where a fabulous feast had been prepared. Gentle music played, and had Izuku been less focused on keeping her dress clean, she might have noticed the way Beast did less eating and more... watching. He really was enamored.

After dinner, as carts wheeled themselves in to take care of the dishes, Beast took her arm once more and guided her to the ballroom. She had only been in here a handful of times, but never had the atmosphere been so... romantic. In the back of her mind, she wondered if this had been Yuga's idea or Beast's, or perhaps all the servants had urged him into this.

Beast offered Izuku his hand with a nervous smile. "Care to dance?"

Izuku smiled back and took his hand. By now, she didn't even shudder at the leathery palm. "Do you know how?"

"Um... no, not really."

"That's okay. Just follow my lead."

She really expected to have her foot stepped on, but Beast did a surprisingly good job simply following her. His touch was so tender, and it showed how hard he was trying not to hurt her in any way. Despite herself, Izuku found her cheeks warming whenever he met her eyes.

In the background, once again, gentle music played. This time, Izuku recognized Ochako singing softly, but she could hardly pay attention to the words.

After some time, Beast pulled away just slightly and let his hand slide more fully into Izuku's. He led her out to the balcony, and although she had seen the stars here several times before, they looked somehow brighter and more beautiful than ever.

"Izuku?" the beast asked softly. "Are you happy here with me?"

"Yes," she responded truthfully, although there was hesitation in her voice.

"But...?"

"Well... I just wish there was a way I could see my mother again, just for a moment. I miss her so much."

Beast's expression fell, but only for a moment. "There *is* a way. Follow me."

Since the night when Izuku fled the castle, she hadn't been back to the west wing. Now, Beast was leading her back there, and it was strange to think about how terrified she'd been last time she was here.

When they entered his lair, Beast picked up a small hand mirror. It seemed to glow with a mystical light.

"This mirror will show you anything, anything you wish to see," he explained as he handed it to Izuku. She looked in the mirror, but only saw her face in it.

"I'd... like to see my mother, please," she asked hesitantly. The mirror glowed, and the image swirled and changed. It appeared to be an image of the forest, and while some of the snow had melted with the first breath of spring, the elements were still harsh. There, out in the cold, was her mother, desperately trying to huddle





"I missed you so much," Izuku sighed, wrapping her arms around her mother.

"But... the beast. How did you escape?"

"I didn't. He let me go."

"That horrible beast let you go?"

"Well, he's different now, Mama. He's... changed, somehow."

Whatever Inko was about to say was cut short by a rustling sound from Izuku's pack. The flap opened, and out rolled Chip. He looked dizzy for a moment, then he grinned that big, toothy smile.

"Hi!"

"Oh, a stowaway," Izuku chuckled.

"Why, hello there, little fella... didn't think I'd ever see you again!"

Chip smiled at Inko for a moment, then turned to Izuku. "Belle, why'd you go away? Don't you like us anymore?"

"Oh, Chip," she sighed. "Of course I do. It's just—"

A sudden knock at the door stopped Izuku's train of thought. She stood and answered the door, only to find the asylum owner, Neito, on the porch.

"Um... may I help you?"

"I've come to collect your mother."

"My mother?"

"Don't worry, mademoiselle..." he hummed, stepping aside with a lopsided grin. "We'll take good care of her."

Behind Neito, several townsfolk were gathered around a wagon belonging to the asylum. Among them, Izuku immediately recognized Katsuki and Eijirou, near the front.

"My mother's not crazy!"

"She was raving like a lunatic!" Eijirou called out. "We all heard her, didn't we!"

The crowd rose with commotion as several of their neighbors agreed.

"What's going on, Izuku?" Inko asked from just behind Izuku. She looked unsteady on her feet, but she was still able to hold her weight.

"Inko," Katsuki yelled over the crowd, "tell us again, just how big was the beast?"

"Well, he was... enormous, I'd say at least eight, maybe ten feet."

"You don't get much crazier than that," Eijirou said as the crowd laughed.

"It's true, really!" Inko claimed, but it was too late. Neito's orderlies were already moving in and carrying Inko away.

"You can't do this!" Izuku cried, to no avail. Neito shook her off and walked away, at which point Katsuki swooped in and stood far too close.

"Poor Belle... such a shame about your mother."

"You *know* she's not crazy, Katsuki."

"I might be able to clear up this little misunderstanding, you know. If..."

"If what?"

"If you marry me."

"Excuse me?"

"One little word, Belle. That's all it takes."

"Never!"

"Have it your way," Katsuki huffed, turning to walk away slowly. Clearly, he expected Izuku to cave and change her mind. Instead, she rushed into the house and returned with the magic mirror.

"My mother's not crazy and I can prove it!" she yelled to the crowd. "Show me the beast," she said to the mirror then, and when the image swirled and began to change, she pointed it out so everyone could see. Several people in the crowd gasped and cried out at the image.

"It's true!"

"Is it dangerous?"

"Oh, no, no," Izuku reassured, "he'd never hurt anyone. Please, I know he looks vicious, but he's really kind and gentle. He's my friend."

"If I didn't know better," Katsuki growled, "I'd think you had feelings for this monster."

"He's no monster, Katsuki. You are!"

"She's as crazy as her old lady!" Katsuki snatched the mirror from Izuku and thrust it at the townsfolk. "The beast will make off with your children! He'll come after them in the night!"

"No, he would never!"

"We're not safe 'til his head is mounted on my wall!"

The crowd began to chant 'kill the beast' as pitchforks and torches were passed around. Izuku could only watch in horror as she tried to wrestle the mirror away from Katsuki.

"No! I won't let you do this!"

"If you're not with us, then you're against us." Katsuki grabbed Izuku by the wrists and dragged her, shouting, "Bring the old woman!"

The mob threw both Izuku and her mother into their cellar and locked the door from the outside. Try as Izuku might, she couldn't get the door open.

"I have to warn the beast," she cried. "This is all my fault. Oh, Mama, what are we going to do?"

"Now, now, honey. We'll think of something!"

"Help me look for something to break the door with. We can fix it another day!"

Izuku and Inko searched, but they came up rather empty. There were plenty of tools, but none that could break wood. Then movement out the window caught Inko's eye.

"What the devil? Oh, Izuku, look out!"

Through the cellar door came Inko's invention, axe chopping away and easily breaking the lock. It crashed into the opposite wall, and out of the wreckage rolled Chip.

"You guys gotta try this thing," he muttered, eyes crossed from the impact.

"Chip! Goodness, we have to go! They're going to attack the castle!"

With Chip stowed away once again in Izuku's pack, the three made their way to the castle, racing atop Phillipe in desperate hopes of making it in time.



"I knew it," Tenya grumbled. "I knew it was foolish to get our hopes up."

"Maybe it would have been better if she had never come at all..." Yuga sighed, candlestick shoulders slumped.

Suddenly, the footstool pup came running in, barking excitedly, something he only ever did when someone was approaching the castle. Immediately, all the servants perked up, hopeful.

"Could it be?"

"Is it she?"

Yuga peeked out a window and gasped. "Sacre bleu, invaders!"

"Warn the master!" Tenya ordered. "If it's a fight they want, we'll be ready for them. Who's with me?"

The servants all chanted their agreement. While everyone got ready to ambush the invaders as soon as they entered the castle, Mrs. Potts ran to the west wing.

"Pardon me, master..." she murmured into his dark, quiet lair.

"Leave me in peace."

"But sir, the castle is under attack!"

Beast looked off his balcony. The invaders had reached the front door and were currently trying to break down the door.

"What shall we do, master?"

"It doesn't matter now," he sighed. "Just let them come."

Mrs. Potts scampered off again quickly. Even if her master had given up, there was no way she was surrendering without a fight.

When the mob finally succeeded in breaking open the front doors, the grand entrance was silent. Assorted pieces of furniture were scattered about, as if someone had begun moving them in and simply abandoned them. The townsfolk crept in warily, some on guard and some just plain scared.

Everything stayed quiet until Eijirou unwittingly picked up Yuga.

"NOW!" the candlestick cried out.

All the objects sprang to life at once. Humans shrieked in surprise as teacups and feather dusters and chairs attacked. Yuga had set about setting as many pairs of pants on fire as he could as soon as Eijirou dropped him. Mei had waddled down the stairs and was using her full weight to her advantage, jumping from the stairs and slamming into invaders. Even the castle dog was pitching in, nipping at the boots of the strangers.

With a surprise attack like that, it didn't take long for the intruders to turn tail and run. Servants cheered their victory... but none noticed that Katsuki had snuck off up the stairs to the west wing, hoping to find the beast. No one noticed at all except for Eijirou, who had followed him at a distance.



By the time Izuku made it to the castle, it seemed the intruders had already fled. However, on one of the front-facing roofs of the west wing towers, she could see the beast... and Katsuki standing over him, ready to swing one of the broken pieces of roofing over his head.

"No! Katsuki, don't!" she yelled, as loud as she could.

Evidently, her voice carried. Beast had been lying still, but his ears visibly perked when he heard her voice. With uncanny swiftness, he whirled on Katsuki and caught the debris before the man could swing it. He brought himself upright, stood as tall as he could, and roared fiercely in Katsuki's face.

The two tumbled back further onto the roof, and from the front gates, Izuku

couldn't see what was happening, let alone do anything to help, so she dismounted and ran as fast as she could, up the stairs and into the west wing.

Admittedly, Katsuki was a fierce opponent. If he hadn't caught the beast on one of the worst days of his life, things might be different, but here, fighting in the rain and still reeling from emotional whiplash, Beast was losing his stamina too quickly. He hid among the gargoyles for a moment while he caught his breath.

"Come on out and fight, coward!" Katsuki yelled, stalking around in search. "Were you in love with her, beast? Did you honestly think she'd want you when she had someone like me?"

That made hot anger rise in Beast's throat. He emerged from the shadows and lunged, grappling with Katsuki until he could wrap one thick hand solidly around the human's throat. Grip tight, he picked the man up with ease and held him over the edge of the roof.

"Let me go," Katsuki rasped, eyes desperate now. "Please, don't hurt me. I'll do anything. Anything!"

The beast narrowed his eyes. This man wasn't so formidable, after all. So easily broken, no sense of pride. For a moment, he considered dropping Katsuki after all, but he pulled back when he remembered his conscience. He held the man close and snarled right in his face for just a moment.

"Get out."

Then he dropped Katsuki, let him choke and sputter on the roof where he was.

"Beast!" Izuku called. She had finally just made it to the balcony of Beast's lair.

Beast looked up, relief washed over his face. "Izuku!"

Like a gorilla, Beast began to scale the wall, climbing back up to the balcony.

"You came back," he breathed when he got close, one hand outstretched to cup Izuku's cheek. She smiled and leaned into the touch, filled with such a deep sense of relief.

The tender moment didn't last long. Izuku gasped and jerked when she saw Katsuki over Beast's shoulder, but it was too late. Katsuki had climbed up some vines and stabbed the beast in his shoulder, causing him to roar in pain and lose his grip.

Izuku tried to reach him. The rain had made everything so slick, she couldn't get a proper grip on Beast before both he and Katsuki were falling. Katsuki had yanked his knife back, but there was nothing he could do to stop his fall, either. Both landed with heavy thuds on the roofing two stories below.

She moved with a strength she didn't know she had. Izuku climbed down the vines without thinking twice and ran to the beast's side, heart in her throat. For the moment, Katsuki was a non issue. He looked incapacitated.



The knife wound on Beast's shoulder was bleeding heavily, but he was still alive, still conscious. Izuku fell to her knees beside him and cradled his head in one arm.

"You... you came back," Beast breathed with difficulty.

"Of course I came back, I couldn't let them... oh, this is all my fault. If only I'd gotten here sooner."

"Maybe... it's better... this way."

"No, don't talk like that. You'll be alright. We're together now! Everything's going to be fine. You'll see."

Beast shook his head and cupped her cheek in one hand. "At least... I got to see you... one last time."

Izuku held Beast's hand to her face, but after a moment, it fell without his support. His eyes rolled back, lids sliding shut. In that moment, everything seemed to stop. Eyes wide, Izuku shook, then clutched Beast's limp head close.

"No, this can't be..." she cried, gasping sobs. "Please, please, please don't leave me! I... I love you."

The tears came and went. Izuku was totally lost in her mind. What was she to do? She couldn't... wouldn't go on. This couldn't be real.

Long moments passed that felt like eternities. It really took Izuku quite some time to notice what was happening.

One streak of light fell from the sky, like a shooting star. Then another came, and another. It wasn't long before many lights came and surrounded the beast. When Izuku noticed, she backed away cautiously, scared of what might be happening to her beast.

The lights grew into a fog that shrouded the beast. It lifted him up into the air, and through the shroud, Izuku could see Beast's feet shrinking, growing more human in shape.

The whole process only took a few seconds, yet felt like watching a caterpillar go through a slow metamorphosis. Beast was lowered to the ground in a heap of his cloak, which was now far too big for him. Izuku was about to come closer when the heap moved, startling her away.

A human stood from the cloak Beast once wore. He moved slowly, as if struggling to use his legs. He looked over his hands, then whirled around and looked at Izuku in amazement.

The man was stunning, from pale blue eyes to the thick white of the hair on half his head. The other half was such a deep auburn, it looked red. Izuku raised an eyebrow at the man, tilting her head in cautious curiosity.

"Izuku! It's me!" the man spoke. His voice sounded familiar, though perhaps not as gravelly as the beast's. She looked him over carefully, from the scar he'd always had over one of his eyes to the way the curve of his smile looked lopsided. There

could be no mistaking it; this man was her beast.

"It is you!" she gasped, running into the man's arms. He hugged her tight, then pulled away, eyes excited but nervous.

Izuku had no nerves left in her. She pressed close and kissed the man, letting him envelop her as fully as he wished.

As they kissed, the light of Beast's transformation spread across the castle. The whole place transformed; the sky cleared, and the monstrous gargoyles on the roof turned to cherubs.

When they clambored back into the castle through the window, several humans were waiting for them, all people Izuku didn't fully recognize. Beast, however, clearly did.

"Yuga, Tenya! Oh, Ochako! Look at us!"

An excited little boy ran into the room with a dog. Ochako laughed and scooped Kota up into her arms, hugging him close.

As hastily as he could, Beast explained everything, perhaps all in one breath. Izuku had to laugh at how ready he seemed to tell her the secret of the Enchantress, how she had cast the spell over the whole castle.

"Wait... you never told me your name. You always said you didn't deserve a name."

"As a beast, no. I didn't. My name... is Shouto Todoroki."

"You're... the prince who was sent to look over our village. They tell stories about how you just disappeared."

"That's me," he chuckled, blush dusting his cheeks. "Izuku... will you be my princess?"

"As if you had to ask," Izuku laughed, throwing herself into his arms.

It wasn't long before Izuku and Shouto were wed. Inko was happy to have a home in the castle, and all the servants were happy to have her there. They even worked to bring everything from Izuku and Inko's family home to the castle, chickens included.

Katsuki never came after Izuku again, nor stepped foot into the forest. Eijirou had pulled him from the roof and nursed him back to health, and as Izuku learned much, much later, they ended up in an odd sort of relationship. It was kept very quiet from the village, but Katsuki, under the guise of taking in orphans as a single parent, adopted children from Paris for him and Eijirou to raise. Izuku had only ever seen them once, but they all seemed somehow odd, similar to the way Eijirou had always struck her as a runt of the litter.

Despite everything, Izuku found that to be the perfect ending for Katsuki. He seemed to have learned a lesson.

Shouto and Izuku... lived happily ever after.











# The Adventures of Ocha the Pooh

A Winnie the Pooh AU by Minty

Todoroki Shouto was a lonely boy. He did not have many friends, couldn't leave the house, had only a mother and not many toys, but what toys he did have, he loved. Most of them were his mother's, you see. She took care of him, but when she had to go out and he was left alone, he missed her. He missed his siblings, Tou-nii and Natsu-nii, and Fuyu-nee. He still didn't understand why they couldn't have come along.

Those thoughts made him sad, though, and he didn't like to be sad. His mother was already sad too much, and he had to be strong, for her sake. He only wanted to make her happy.

So, he played make believe. It was something she'd taught him, introducing him to her little army of stuffed friends one sunny afternoon. "There's Ocha the Pooh," she'd started with a rare smile, taking each animal in hand as she did, "and this is Piglet, Tigger, Iida-owl, Rabbit, Tsuyu the Frog, Kanga and little Katsuki."

Shouto had greeted each of them solemnly, wordlessly, imprinting their names onto his mind. These were his mother's. He was going to treasure them.

He'd never had stuffed animals before, although he'd had something similar in the form of animal-looking *hero* plushies. If he tried hard enough, he could pretend that his mother's toys were the same. His mother didn't like talking about heroes, though. He thought they reminded her too much of Father, and Father was the reason why they'd run away. He was not like the heroes on television at all; he hurt Shouto's siblings, and he hurt his mother.

"In Ocha the Pooh's world," his mother explained, "Ochako and her friends live in a deep wood. They love to have adventures, and they spend their days with each other just doing *nothing*, and they smile, and laugh, and have fun."

It was a little boring, Shouto thought, but then his mother had laughed softly, probably at his expression, and took his hands in hers, meeting his gaze with a twinkle in her eyes. "Your make-believe world doesn't have to be the same, Shouto. You can make them however you want. They're your toys now."

*Mine.*

Shouto didn't have many things that were just his. He was useless, Father said so, and useless boys didn't deserve things.

Shouto thought hard, and he knew what he wanted to do.





*Deep in the Hundred Acre Wood, where Todoroki Shouto plays, you'll find a charming neighbourhood of Shouto's childhood days.*

*A frog named Tsuyu is his friend, and Kanga and little Katsuki, and Tigger too.*

*There's Rabbit, and Piglet, and Iida-owl, and most of all Ocha the Pooh.*

*Ocha the Pooh was a little silly, for she was a bear of very little brain. She was chubby, and all stuffed with fluff. However, she was also kind, and loyal, and she was always there for her friends when they needed her. She was Shouto's most favourite toy of them all.*



It was a sunny morning that arose over Hundred Acre Wood when Ocha the Pooh, or Ochako for short, jumped out of bed, greeting the day with enthusiasm. She had a very important task to do that day, for she was a honey bear, and she loved eating honey. However, there was no more honey left in any of her honey pots; she had quite possibly eaten them all.

That wouldn't do, considering that she had a great many other things she wanted to get done, and her friends to see. She needed to eat, and fast.

Her rumbling stomach tugged her out of her quaint little house, and led her walking along a quaint little path towards where her friends stayed. She hoped they might have an answer to her problem; that is, she hoped they might have some honey to spare.

When she heard a sigh from somewhere close by, she knew immediately who it was.

"Oh my, Tsuyu. It's a nice day to be out, isn't it?"

Tsuyu was a frog who lived by the pond near Ochako's house. Today, she was sat by a bridge, dangling her legs in front of her contemplatively. If Ochako had to guess, it seemed that Tsuyu had a sadder aura to her than usual, though.

"I wish I could say yes, but I can't, ribbit."

"Oh? Are you alright Tsuyu?" Ochako glanced over her friend worriedly. "What happened to your tail?"

"Hmm? What about it, ribbit?"

"It, well, it isn't *there*, Tsuyu."

Tsuyu took a moment before nodding gravely, as if she had grasped the severity of the situation, sitting on her haunches as she thought aloud. "Ahh, that explains everything then, ribbit."

"Indeed," Ochako agreed, rubbing her paw under her chin. Tsuyu was one of her very best friends. She didn't have a tail when Ochako first met her, but it was a gift from Todoroki Shouto—a tail pinned to her back, green, shiny, and lovingly crafted.

It meant a lot to Tsuyu. Ochako's stomach grumbled again, but she ignored it. Although she was hungry, she thought that Tsuyu needed her help just a little bit more.

She thought for a moment before making her decision, holding up a paw to Tsuyu to help her up.

"Well," she said, "let's go, then."

Tsuyu took her hand.

"Where will we be going, ribbit?"

"To help you get a new tail, of course!" Ochako declared. Once Tsuyu had one, she would be happy. And then after that, Ochako could find some honey.



"I say, hello down there!"

Ochako and Tsuyu looked up to find their good friend, Iida-owl, swooping low to land on a tree stump in front of them. Iida-owl was an owl who loved books and reading, as well as making sure everything followed its proper order and place. As he landed, he shook his feathers gracefully, balancing his glasses precariously on the tip of his nose.

"Hello Iida!" Ochako greeted.

"Hello Iida-owl," echoed Tsuyu.

Iida cocked his head to the side, eyeing them in curiosity with big, unblinking eyes. "You two seem to be in a hurry. Where might the two of you be heading this fine day?"

Ochako gestured to Tsuyu with a paw, and Tsuyu accordingly turned, showing the sad absence of fabric where her tail should be. "Tsuyu can't find her tail," Ochako explained. "We were going to Todoroki Shouto to see if he could find a solution."

Just then, there was another insistent grumble from Ochako's tummy, reminding her of her own needs. "I also need to find some honey," she added.

"Hmm," Iida stroked his chin with a feather thoughtfully. "Perhaps I shall go along with you. I too am pained to see Tsuyu in such distress."

"It's actually fine, ribbit."

"Nonsense! We know how much the tail means to you, Tsuyu!" Iida declared. "As your friend, I should accompany the two of you, so that we can make haste and

solve this perplexing dilemma!"

With that said, Iida stretched his feathers, all meticulously groomed and glossy, before lifting himself off of the ground. "Come, let us be off!"

"I really don't know that this is a good idea, ribbit," Tsuyu muttered, and Ochako stopped.

"Why, whatever do you mean, Tsuyu?"

"It's just that..." Tsuyu regarded Ochako unblinkingly for a few moments before sighing. "I don't know if it's a good idea to see Todoroki Shouto about this, ribbit."

"But if we go to see him, he could help you make a new tail."

"That's just it, ribbit!" Tsuyu shuffled uncomfortably, not meeting Ochako's eyes. "I don't want him to know that I've lost the tail he made for me, ribbit."

Ochako regarded her for a moment, and then she nodded. "Hmm, if you think that's what is best, then it is what we shall do."

"Really, ribbit?"

"Yes," Ochako nodded. "Iida!" she called, hoping their flying friend could still hear her.

Thankfully, he was merely circling overhead, waiting for them to follow him and at her call, he swooped down again, back to the same lowly tree stump. "Ochako? Tsuyu? Are we not going to find Todoroki Shouto?"

"No, there's been a change of plans," Ochako said. "We're not going to see Todoroki Shouto about this." She looked at Tsuyu, who stared steadily back. What else could they do though?

She lifted her paw to her chin, stroking it thoughtfully and squinting her eye as she thought. "Think, think, think..."

If they wouldn't go to Todoroki Shouto to find a replacement tail, then the only solution...would be to find the one that they had lost!

"We are going to find Tsuyu's tail!" Ochako declared, turning a beaming smile on Tsuyu. "We'll find it all by ourselves!"

"Hmm, that *is* a splendid idea, I'd say!" Iida agreed. He tilted his chin in askance. "I must say though, how are you planning on doing that? The Hundred Acre Wood is so very huge."

"That's easy," Ochako said. "We're going to get help!"

"Ah, like a treasure hunt!" Iida pushed his glasses up his nose with a hoot that they'd long since learned to interpret as excitement. "Absolutely inspired! We shall enlist the help of everyone, and find Tsuyu's tail together! And perhaps," he started to ramble, voice lowering, "since this *is* going to be a treasure hunt, as a customary procedure, we could issue a reward at the end of the journey!"

"Umm, a reward?" Ochako cut in, blinking. She was not sure if she had understood all of Iida's words, but she understood that at least.

"Yes, a reward! For the good friend who can find Tsuyu's tail, we could present them with a recognition of their achievement, a- hmm, let's see here, what would be a good reward?"

"Perhaps," Ochako licked her suddenly dry lips. "Quite possibly, a jar of honey?"

Iida hooted joyfully. "Yes, yes, I do believe that will work! I should have more than enough back home!" He pushed his glasses up his nose once more, smiling. "It is settled then! I shall go and draft a notice promising a jar of honey to anyone who can either find Tsuyu's tail or a good replacement of it! Ochako, Tsuyu, gather our friends and meet me in front of my house. Come, come, opportunity beckons!"

And so while Iida flew back to his treehouse in one of the tallest trees in the forest, Ochako and Tsuyu went to find the rest of the residents of the Hundred Acre Wood. It wasn't long before they ran into a peculiarly-shaped one, red in colour and floating gently above the ground.

"Hello there, balloon!" Ochako greeted the balloon cheerfully. "We have a very important thing which we need to do today. Perhaps," the balloon cut in with a low growl suddenly, and Ochako faltered slightly, before deciding to press on, "you'd like to join us?"

When the balloon gave no reply, she gestured to Tsuyu. "You see, our dear friend has lost her tail-"

"Ah hah! Ah hah ha hah!"

In the next second, Ochako found herself on the ground, the wind knocked out of her lungs as Tigger grinned broadly down at her, shiny white canines glinting in the sunlight. "Consider yourself pounced!" he proclaimed proudly.

He cleared his throat before leaning in closer, white tail flickering. "You should really be more careful, Pooh Bear! That balloon..." he lowered his voice, "...was sneaking up on you."

"W-what?"

"I've noticed it floating around. Highly suspicious, don't you think? Never fear though, your hero is here!"

"Tigger... Inasa... Please get off of me."

Indeed, Tigger was a heavy weight pressing down on her, and when he finally removed himself, Ochako took in deep, gulping breaths, filling her lungs with air gratefully. Inasa Yoarashi, or Tigger for short, was an energetic creature who arrived at the Hundred Acre Wood one day like a whirlwind, leaving a distinct mark everywhere he touched. Ochako had met him when he'd knocked on her door, bowling her over and warning her about heffalumps and woozles who would come to steal her honey. He was a little over-excited about everything, which Ochako

didn't mind too much, but he wasn't always aware of his strength, so she always had to be careful that especially little Katsuki or Piglet did not accidentally get crushed by him.

Now he whirled around, pouncing at the red balloon and trying to wrestle it onto the ground. The balloon was a stubborn thing however that stuck to his fur instead, and after several attempts to pry it off, Tigger gave up with a loud, sad growl. "Is this my fate, to be stuck with a sidekick now?"

He sat back on his haunches, peering at Ochako curiously on the ground, perhaps just noticing Tsuyu staring back at him behind her. "Where are the two of you heading anyway?"

Ochako got up slowly, rubbing at her sore rump. "We're going to have a meeting in front of Owl's house," she said. "It's very important. Tigger, won't you come along with us?"

"Ah, I would! But there may be others in the Wood that need my help. Ah, it's a dangerous path that I bounce, Pooh Bear, but I have to bounce it alone. Because the Hundred Acre Wood needs a hero, and I'm the only one. Ah, I'm bouncy, and trouncy, flouncy, and pouncy and so so so so fun! Still, the most wonderful thing about Tiggers is that I'm the only one. I'm the only one!"

Just as sudden as he'd come, Tigger bounced away, the red balloon still tucked snugly in his fur. Tsuyu and Ochako watched him go until his shape was swallowed up in the darkness of the trees.

Tsuyu hummed. "Perhaps it would be best if we let him be, ribbit?"

Ochako nodded slowly. "...Yes, I think so."

They resumed their trek to Iida-owl's house, stopping by Kanga and Katsuki's place, and then Piglet's. Rabbit clapped her paws together when she heard the news. "Oh, you poor, sweet thing," she crooned. "Ocha-babes, I'm sure we will be able to find Tsuyu's tail soon!"

Indeed, when they all gathered at Iida-owl's place, and Iida assigned them markers on where to begin their search, they were all feeling hopeful that they would find Tsuyu's tail in no time.

Yet as they began to scour the Hundred Acre Wood, turning over every rock and looking into tree hollows—Ochako may or may not have gotten side-tracked with that, eagerly climbing a few honey trees—there was no piece of green fabric in sight. Ochako witnessed Tsuyu grow progressively more silent, even as her stomach became progressively more demanding, demanding to be fed.

That was when Kanga hopped over, waving an alarm clock at them with one paw. "Listen, Tsu-babes, I know this isn't anything like the tail Todoroki Shouto made for you," she began, "but how about this for a replacement instead?" She winked. "It'll look really sweet on you, I think."

"I say, capital idea!" Iida agreed, and with only a little reluctance, Tsuyu was con-



vinced to rope the chain around her neck, the chain long enough that the clock landed neatly on her bottom.

"Hah, see, I knew this would work."

Kanga threw a smug look at Katsuki's way, but it lasted only for a second. When Tsuyu sat, there was a distinctive "crunch" sound.

Kanga gasped. "My- my clock!"

Tsuyu stood up immediately. "What happened, ribbit?"

"It's sort of," Ochako didn't want to admit it, "just, I think it's kind of—"

"—Broken," Kanga and Tsuyu said in unison, before looking at each other in surprise.

Tsuyu ducked her head, looking down mournfully. "I'm sorry, Kanga, ribbit."

"Tch," little Katsuki said.

"Hush, little one," Kanga reprimanded, a little red-faced herself. "I'm awfully sorry too, Tsuyu."

"No worries, ribbit. It was a good idea."

It certainly was. Inspired by Kanga's attempt, everyone else abandoned their original search, and instead started to look for objects that could possibly pass for Tsuyu's tail. Tsuyu was presented with an umbrella from Ochako, a yoyo from Katsuki, an old weathervane from Rabbit, and even the red balloon which Tigger happily presented when he happened on the scene. Tsuyu dutifully tried on each one, but none seemed to fit exactly; not the umbrella, because it dragged her along when the wind blew too forcefully. Not the yoyo, unrolling and bopping her hard on the head. Not the weathervane, because it could and *did* draw the lightning in, giving Tsuyu a very unwelcome shock.

And not the red balloon, for apparently Tsuyu was a lot lighter than she looked, and the balloon had lifted her off of her feet and off the ground a good minute before anyone had realised and frantically tried to get her down.

Kanga, having knitted together some fabric for a costume with her sewing needles while all this was going on, eventually struck upon an idea, however. After a moment's hesitation, she pinned her newly knitted red sleeve to Tsuyu's bottom with a few bobby pins, asking Tsuyu to try it on. When Tsuyu managed to complete a full circle's turn without the fabric slipping off, Kanga clapped her paws together in satisfaction. "Ah, you look radiant in it, Tsu-babes! Doesn't she look beautiful?"

"It's, umm, a little bright," Tsuyu admitted. "But otherwise, it's okay, ribbit."

With everyone nodding their assent, eventually Iida was called upon to bestow the jar of honey upon Kanga, to Ochako's open-mouthed dismay.

Ochako sighed. She supposed that her job here was done at least. There was a

thick knot in her stomach; it felt painfully empty, and Ochako could not bear it.

Saying goodbye to Tsuyu, she wound her way to Todoroki Shouto's house. He always knew best how to help everyone in the Hundred Acre Wood. She knew she could count on him to do the same for her.



Alas, there was only a note on the front door of the quaint little house Todoroki Shouto stayed, on the very borders of the Hundred Acre Wood. Ochako's heart sank. She couldn't read, but when she called out Shouto's name, there was no reply. Not even when she called out his name again, and Todoroki Shouto always came when she called.

Ochako carefully unstuck the note from the door, sticking it on her paw instead, and made her way once more back to Iida-owl. He would help her decipher what the note said.

Ochako could only hope it wasn't anything too serious. For the past few days, Todoroki Shouto had left their wood perhaps only once or twice. She wondered if perhaps he too had something very important to do, perhaps a friend or family he needed to help, like Ochako and her friends helped Tsuyu.

He didn't talk about them much, Ochako knew. But he was always sad when he did.

She didn't like to see him sad. Todoroki Shouto was a boy who deserved to be happy, the same way he made everyone in the Hundred Acre Wood happy.

Ochako eventually found Iida, although her friend was not at his home either, and she ran into him perched on top of the bridge where she and Shouto liked to throw sticks into the river, observing the bits of wood floating downstream. It would've been a perfect day to do so, she thought, noting how pretty the leaves turned orange to reflect the waning light of the sun.

Iida was writing something onto an opened, empty book with sure strokes of ink.

"Iida!" she said.

"Ah!" Iida startled, accidentally tilting his pen the wrong way and dotting his page with ink blots. "Ochako! Please give a better word of warning next time!"

"Sorry."

Ochako presented her note to him with a little bit of trepidation.

"I found this in front of Todoroki Shouto's house. What does the note say, Iida-owl?"

"Hm, in front of Todoroki Shouto's house, you say? Here, bring your paw closer, and no moving please."

Iida examined the words gravely, nodding to himself and muttering once or twice. Ochako's eyes widened. Oh, she hoped Todoroki Shouto was not hurt or in pain! "So, Iida?"

"I am quite sure he's fine," Iida pronounced after a moment, and Ochako exhaled a relieved sigh. "I believe the note says his mother has come to get him, and, if I am to read this right, he should be back soon."

Ah. So it was something important after all. Ochako nodded. She placed her paws on the rails briefly, casting her gaze to the quietly churning water below. Leaves of yellow and red were falling softly onto the river, and Ochako let out a chuckle as she counted the red leaves silently, seeing how they easily outnumbered the yellow ones. She couldn't wait to tell Todoroki Shouto that it was one of those days.

She sighed. Beside her, there was a gentle *scritch* as Iida continued to write, well, whatever he was writing, down.

"Iida," she eventually said, "I suppose it wouldn't be too out-of-the-blue for me to ask if you could perhaps spare a single honey pot? If you would be so kind."

"A honey pot, you say?" Iida halted his pen, peering at her thoughtfully. Ochako's tummy grumbled loudly in response, and Iida smiled. "Well of course, Ochako, I could never turn down a friend in need. If you would give me a minute..."

Iida tucked his small blue book away and out of sight, along with his pen. "Off we go, then!" he grinned, taking flight. "If I would be so bold..."

The next thing she knew, Ochako's feet were leaving the ground too, and she squealed in shock, holding onto Iida's claws for dear life. "Umm, Iida, are you sure this is a good idea?"

"Jolly faster this way, don't you think?" Iida grinned down at her, letting out a hoot. "Now, do hang on!"

Although Iida-owl didn't exactly look it, Ochako very quickly found out he had a nose for speed. He soared up, angling himself towards the sun as he gained altitude, Ochako trying not to look down all the while, before taking a sharp nosedive, zipping gracefully back to his treehouse and dropping Ochako onto his porch.

Ochako's breath had been stolen from her throat. It was almost frightful. Her legs trembled, suddenly all too weak, and dropped out beneath her onto cold wood gratefully. She said nothing for several heartbeats, waiting for her thudding heart to calm down. When she had gotten her breathing under control, she rasped, "Iida. Kindly never do that again."

Iida scratched his head bashfully with a claw. "Ah, my apologies, Ochako. Here, I shall pour us some tea, shall I?"

At least, Ochako thought, Iida was a bird of his word. She happily dug into the jar of honey, dipping her paws into sweet nectar and sipping the sticky liquid into her mouth. It was heavenly.

As Ochako turned to Iida to thank him, a flash of green caught her eye. It was a thin strip of fabric, lying on Iida's book table, bound nicely around a thick black tome. Ochako couldn't quite put her finger on it, but the fabric reminded her of something.

She had her third taste of glorious honey when it hit her. The strip of fabric... was Tsuyu's!

"Iida, where did you get that?" she asked, pointing to the item in question.

Iida blinked. "Oh, this?" He picked up the shiny black tome and patting at the ribbon with a self-satisfied preen. "I saw this in the woods this morning, stuck on a bramble of thistles. No one seemed to want it, so I brought it home."

"Would this bramble of thistles happen to be situated by a very large pond?"

"Why, yes," Iida looked at Ochako in astonishment. "Yes, I believe so!"

"Iida, I do believe..." Ochako said consideringly, her eyebrows scrunched in thought, "if I am not mistaken, that is Tsuyu's tail!"

Iida gasped. "I beg your pardon?"

"Tsuyu lives in a bramble bush beside the pond. Her tail went missing this morning. This tail, I think, must be hers!"

Iida gaped at her, before shaking his head vigorously. He set the tome down gently before unwinding the ribbon around it and taking the fabric under his claw. "We must find Tsuyu right away and apologise!" he shouted. "I have done her a horrible wrong!"

"Wait, Iida," Ochako said, but Iida had already flown away.

Ochako sighed. She wondered if she should go after Iida, but without his help, she was not sure if she could get down from his tree on her own. His treehouse was extremely high up. There was no choice but to wait.

Of her own accord, Ochako's paws found their way back into the honey pot. That's right, she thought. It would only be good "hos-ti-la-lity", according to Iida, if she finished what he had offered to her for free, and he had very graciously placed at least three honey pots on the table.

Just one taste of honey couldn't hurt, she thought, and so she brought her paw to her mouth. She did it, again and again until the jar was empty. One pot soon turned into two, which then turned into three. By the time Ochako had made her way through all Iida's proffered honey pots, her stomach was grumbling in contentment, finally feeling full. Ochako patted her stomach merrily.

Today had been, after all, a good day. Ochako couldn't wait to tell Todoroki Shouto.



The sun was dipping low, snaking fingers of red, orange and purple across the sky. Before her was a wide, open field, and she could hear the grasses rustling gently in the breeze.

"Hello, Ocha the Pooh," Shouto whispered softly, taking a seat beside her on the log.

Ochako craned her head slowly, turning toward him and smiling. "Hello, Shouto," she said. "You found me."

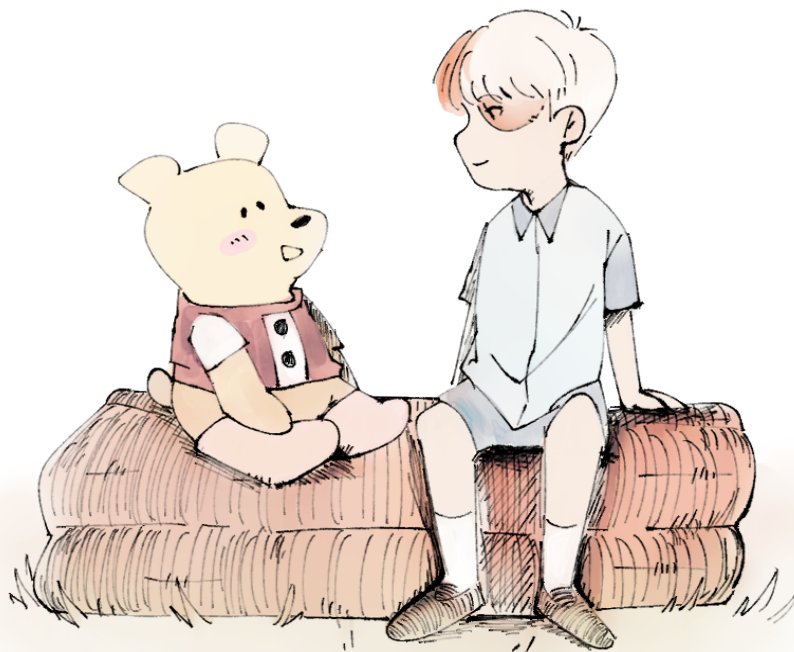
"I suppose I did." He shifted for a moment, and the wind blew softly through the strands of his hair, highlighting the redness of it, the whiteness of it. There was the smallest quirk of his lips upwards. Ochako smiled even wider. It wasn't often that Todoroki Shouto smiled.

"I heard from Iida-owl and Tsuyu what you did today," he eventually said. "It sounds like a bit of a story."

Ochako nodded. "Yes, it was. You also had to go do something very important, didn't you, Todoroki Shouto?"

There was something wondrous on Shouto's face, his face softening, smile widening to overtake his face. Ochako was entranced, especially when Shouto turned to look at her, chuckling. "Yes, yes, I did. It's, uh, quite a story too."

"Would you like to hear it? It's about a boy who lost something very important to him, and though he tried to make a new home, he realised it didn't quite fit. He found happiness again, when he realised he had found his very precious thing, and that the rest of his family could come home..."



















# Red Paper Airplane

A Paperman AU by Frankie in collaboration with ViviwithaV

Katsuki's world changes when he catches a flash of red.

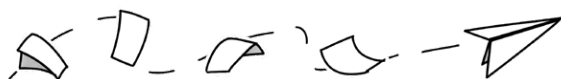
It starts on a normal morning, waiting for his normal train to go to his normal job. Then, he sees it: a piece of crimson-colored paper sailing through the air, propelled by the whoosh of the oncoming train rushing onto the opposite platform.

Katsuki's eyes follow the paper as it flies straight towards him and lands directly on his face. He hears the high whine of the train coming to a stop, the shuffle of people getting on and off the nearby compartment, and he scrambles blindly, scrunching the paper in the middle and bringing it to eye level. It's some sort of form, Katsuki doesn't really know exactly what for, but it looks important, even if it's printed on such an obnoxious color. He looks around for the source, then sees a man with spiked scarlet hair running into the nearest compartment just before the doors close.

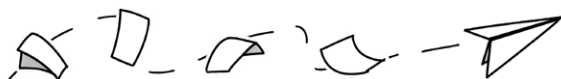
Someone with hair like that would print a form on paper like this. It's too late to actually do anything at this point, but Katsuki goes up to the window anyways and taps it with his knuckle. He holds up the paper to show the red-haired guy, whose eyes widen in recognition. Red smiles sheepishly and pulls a whole stack of bright red copies out of his bag and shrugs, which Katsuki interprets as an "oh well" gesture. Katsuki feels his mouth press into a hard line, finding the guy's happy-go-lucky thing a bit much, but then Red looks him in the eyes and flashes him a radiant smile.

Maybe it was a trick of the light, but Katsuki could've sworn he went blind. Unexpectedly, he feels warmth rising in his cheeks and can only blink as Red's expression turns quickly from friendly to curious. Before anything else happens, the train slowly carries Red away from the station and from Katsuki.

Katsuki looks at the crumpled paper in his hand after the train speeds away. There's nothing on there showing Red's real name or contact info. He folds up the paper and puts it in his jacket pocket, and forgets it's even there by the time his train arrives.



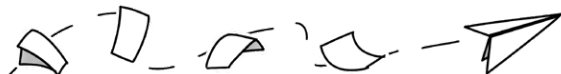
*Eijirou catches a glimpse of the signature orange-red and white of Tokyo Tower as the train speeds him along. He wonders idly how the man with the blonde hair and ruby-colored eyes knew that the rogue paper belonged to him before spying the reflection of his red locks in the window and chuckling to himself.*





That afternoon, Katsuki is looking through a stack of his usual reports in his cubicle when he sees another flash of crimson from the window. He flicks his eyes over, hoping to see another red form, but instead, he finds a familiar head of spiked hair through an open window in the building across from his.

Katsuki drops the report in his hands. His palms tingle slightly at the loss of contact, as if his body is telling him to wake the hell up, but Katsuki recognizes Red's toothy smile as if he'd seen it a hundred times. He looks closer and notices that Red is sitting across a desk from someone, as if in an interview or business meeting.



The warm air from the traffic below rushes upwards as Katsuki pushes his window open and peeks his head just beyond the windowpane. He stares closely at Red's profile. There is no way that Red will notice him if he shouts or waves. It's too far a distance to hear, and Red is concentrating too hard on his conversation to look over. A reasonable person may just try to go on his break and walk over to the other building, but Katsuki has decided that all reason flew out the door when he saw Red a second time today.

He looks back at the window and watches a plane cut through a wispy summer cloud in the sky, and suddenly has a stupid idea. Rolling up his shirt sleeves, Katsuki sits back down at his desk, rips the first page off of his report, and folds it into a paper airplane. Hesitation takes over, the stupidity of the idea settling on Katsuki. To hell with it. He rolls his chair back to the window, points it in Red's direction, and throws it. The paper crackles merrily as it leaves his hand. It bears straight towards Red... then dives downwards into the street.

Katsuki snorts. He rolls back to the desk and rips another page off the report. The new plane loops up high, then sails into the wall to the right of Red's window. The next one barely makes it halfway across the street. Another one soars in another office below Red, causing the occupant to jump and flip him off. Another lands neatly in the wastebasket behind Red. He doesn't seem to notice it.

Katsuki nearly tears his hair out at that one.

After the next one falls through the sunroof of a passing car, Katsuki reaches behind for another piece of paper, only to smack the wooden top of his desk because he'd used up all of his report. He clicks his tongue, then jerks open his drawer, rattling the desk as he looks for more paper.

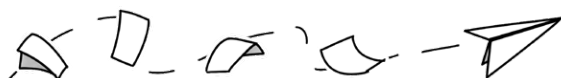
And, of course, he can't find more in his stupid cubicle. Katsuki heaves a great sigh and leans back in his chair, folding his palms together and squeezing. Was he really bored or did he really want to meet Red? He'd always kept to himself, the faces of past friends, work associates, and classmates all blurring together into a forgettable blob. But, Red is bright, vibrant, like a warm beacon that Katsuki wants to bask in. Either way, he feels disappointed and wishes the day would end so he could wallow in misery at home.

As he reaches into his jacket to check the time on his phone, Katsuki's hand brushes against Red's flyer. Fingers close around the crumpled paper, and he slips it out, stomach fluttering with nerves. Katsuki smoothes it out on his desk as best he can, then folds it into what he decides would be the last plane.

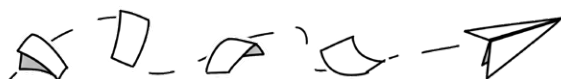
He takes a deep breath, and steps towards the window, pointing the plane at Red's silhouette with an absolute focus, hoping against hope that this would reach Red.

But, before he can throw it, a big gust of wind blows him back and pries the paper from between his fingers. As he blinks and sputters, Katsuki lunges to grasp at it, but he misses. He's forced to watch his ruby-colored plane drop straight down and disappear into the busy street.

Katsuki can't stop the shock that wells up from his gut. His rolling chair creaks as he sits back down, then he goes to his computer and hits print on his report so he can redo the work he'd literally thrown out the window. He has so much to do before the day is over.



*A sudden wind rattles the open window of the office where Eijirou is hashing out a business proposal. When he goes to shut it, he glances down and thinks he sees a streak of red on the sidewalk below, and this makes him briefly remember the man on the train station earlier that day. Eijirou goes back to his seat, asking his colleague about the stray paper airplane in his wastebasket with a mix of delight and confusion.*



After work, Katsuki gets a third flash of ruby as he stands at the edge of his platform, waiting for the train home. He gazes downwards. The red paper airplane is sitting on top of his shoes.

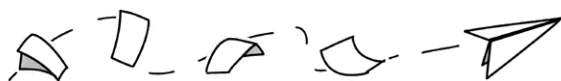
Katsuki glares at it. It had been just a normal morning, waiting for his normal train to go to his normal job until this stupid piece of paper got in his face. Katsuki crouches down above the paper plane and takes it in his hand, remembering all the failed flights from earlier. Why had he even tried so hard to get Red's attention? They hadn't even spoken to each other, had barely interacted for two seconds.

And yet...

Katsuki hears the announcement for his train blare over the speakers and stands up quickly, paper airplane still in hand. On the edge of the platform, standing stock straight, toes behind the yellow line, Katsuki suddenly feels like he's seeing his current life clearly. It's like an old film reel where the protagonist lives the same day over and over again. He'd resigned himself to a world that would always remain normal and colorless for him.

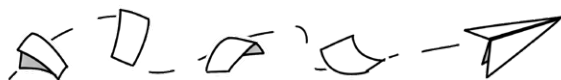
But that had changed when he found himself blushing at a stranger on a departing train, red paper in hand. A world of black and white, suddenly dyed with red.

Pointing the plane skyward and picturing the scarlet head of hair he'd been chasing that day, Katsuki makes a childish wish to himself, and throws the plane hard. It sails over the arriving train and disappears into the horizon. Passersby stare nervously at him, and he grunts dismissively. Katsuki steps into the nearby compartment and finds a seat next to the window. He runs his hands through his hair, smirking at himself as the train starts to move.



*The red paper airplane soars up and up over the tall Tokyo skyline. It dives down to street-level in the heart of the city, heedless of swerving cars and crowded sidewalks, finally drifting into a cold, sunless alleyway behind Katsuki's office building. All of his fallen planes, white and wrinkled, are laying over a few stacks of old newspapers, tied up neatly in twine for recycling. With a flourish, the red paper airplane circles them. The wind picks up, each plane twitching with the movement, eventually catching air.*

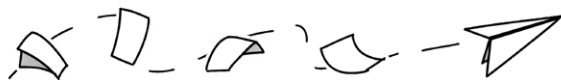
*One by one, they rise up together in slow dance, which builds into a relentless whirlwind of something momentous. With a newfound speed, the planes rush upwards into the sky above the buildings, then dissipate. The white planes fly off in one direction, while the red plane twists in the other.*



Speeding alongside the skyscrapers and neon lights of the city, Katsuki spies something white and triangular in his periphery. His mouth drops open when he realizes what it is: a paper airplane, soaring through the air and keeping speed alongside the train, as if pulled by an invisible string. It catches up to Katsuki's window, then sticks to the glass right above his eyeline.

Katsuki looks around, hoping to see something to explain this—a sign, a television crew, hell, even a stupid YouTuber with a camera and gimbel. But he's distracted when another plane whips up and joins it. Then another. And another.

In a matter of seconds, a whole flock of paper planes has covered Katsuki's window, crackling loudly through the glass.



*Just a few blocks away, the red paper airplane descends onto the sidewalk as Eijirou is stepping out of his building. He pauses, recognizing the shade of crimson, and he stoops down to pick up the plane with trembling fingers, thinking once more of the red-eyed man from this morning. Before he can grasp it, the plane slips from his hands, circles him once, twice, then jets down the street. Eijirou, unthinking, sprints after it.*



When the train stops at the next station, Katsuki watches the swarm carefully, prepared for more weirdness. It comes as the doors open. The planes extricate themselves from his window, flow up over the train, and weave through the passengers coming in and out of the compartment.

They make a beeline straight for him.

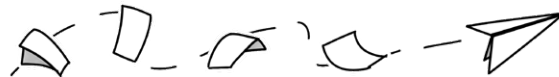
Alarmed, Katsuki stands up to shield himself, to fight, to do something, but the planes swarm around him, some sticking to his clothes and others flying around him in a mad fury.

The passengers around him stare. Katsuki looks incredulously back at them, attempting to swat the papers away, but to no avail. Completely surrounded with nowhere to run, Katsuki is forced out of the compartment and onto the platform with a mighty push from the planes.

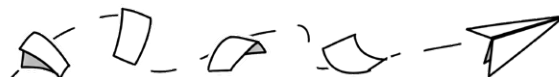
People are openly staring and pointing at Katsuki as he is compelled out of the station and into the street by the tittering papers, but he can't bring himself to care as he attempts to bat and punch his way through them. Heart beating rapidly, hands still balled into fists, Katsuki tries to think about this logically. Were these the planes he made this afternoon? What were they doing? Was this magic?

Logic is very obviously not going to help him right now.

At the very least, Katsuki wants to at least find out where he is being taken. He tries to focus on what's in front of him as the planes push and prod him forward, but his vision is blurred by streaks of white.



*Eijirou follows the red paper airplane blindly as it zips into a nearby train station. He faintly hears a commotion, like a bunch of newspapers being scattered, behind him. But Eijirou can't be bothered to look back. The plane leads him up a flight of stairs, soars in a playful loop over the lines of people waiting for their trains, then drops right at the edge of the platform, where the sun is now setting. He waits, he's not sure for what, but he has a feeling it has to do with the strange sound of rustling papers that grows ever nearer. As he turns towards the sound, still waiting on the platform, a childlike glee spreads a smile from cheek to cheek when Eijirou sees him.*



Amid the crinkling of the paper swarm, Katsuki is forced through a large entryway, then hears lots of footsteps and voices at once. Was he at another station? He confirms it for himself when he hears a station announcement overhead and is carried over a turnstile. This was his usual station, Katsuki realizes, the one he'd just left. He is utterly bewildered as the planes usher him back to the platform and force him to a stop at the farthest point where the last car usually stops.

Then, as if in slow motion, the planes fall away from him.

"The hell?" Katsuki looks down at the fallen planes at his feet. He whips himself around, looking for some kind of explanation or reason for the madness, only to find himself face to face with someone.

"Red," Katsuki blurts, jumping back and taking in the hair, the eyes, the crimson paper airplane in his hands.

"Red?" the guy says. "That's my favorite color."

"No kidding," Katsuki says distractedly, looking down at the planes and cautiously poking one with his toe. It doesn't budge.

"Um," Red says. "What. What just happened?"

"I couldn't really tell you." Katsuki, still wary, runs a hand through his hair and goes ahead to prod the rest of the planes in turn with his foot.

"Did you make those?" Red asks.

"Uh. I don't know. Maybe?"

"Oh. Did you make this one?" Red holds out the plane in his hands. Katsuki whips his gaze up from the red paper airplane and looks into Red's eyes.

"Definitely."

For some reason, Red responds to this with the same brilliant smile as before. It is inexplicable. Katsuki is still completely confused about what kind of strange magic just happened, but he can't really say anything about it now with Red staring at him. He'll take this small gift, the gift that gave his world color.

"I'm Eijirou," he says, extending a hand to Katsuki.

"Katsuki." He takes Eijirou's hand in his, and they shake slowly.

Hands still clasped, Katsuki and Eijirou both jolt when a train rushes by them with a roar, causing the paper airplanes at Katsuki's feet to whirl around them. They release each other as the planes blow over the platform's edge and rush skyward, a huge tornado of white. The gust eventually scatters, and the planes gently drift back to earth. Katsuki's eyes flick over to Eijirou's, and he catches his gaze with a bright laugh, unsure of what exactly they're looking at.

Katsuki isn't really sure of what it is either. He has no idea how his day got so crazy and emotional, what made the paper airplanes come to life, or why he feels like his chest is on fire right now. But when he catches Eijirou's smile in the sunlight, his laugh broken up by the flurry of airplanes, Katsuki's heart flutters and eases. He doesn't even know what will happen next, if they'd get a coffee or dinner or what, but Katsuki smiles back at Eijirou's joyful face, eager to find out.















# X Marks the Spot (Where My Heart is Buried)

A Treasure Planet AU by juurensa

“Go back home,’ you said. ‘It’ll be cathartic and nice,’ you said,” Hawks mutters, running a hand through his sopping wet hair while attempting to keep the horses galloping in line away from the blaze behind them. “Yes, going home to see my thief of a father who gave me a ‘gift’ that turned out to be something he stole from a bunch of *pirates* who proceeded to *burn down the inn* I was staying in was so cathartic and nice!”

“How was I supposed to know that your dad was involved with *pirates*?” Fuyumi demands, clutching her bag to her and wiping at the soot on her face.

“When I said he was super shady!” Hawks retorts, “Never would have come here except you deciding to drag me here while you had a conference.”

“And because you have to look like a supportive fiancé, even if it’s fake. Besides, you’re on probation anyway since you got caught solar-boarding through a restricted industrial zone. Again,” Fuyumi reminds him.

Hawks sighs, “You don’t get it, Fuyumi. Sometimes, I just need to—soar.”

(The Navy and all its pressures on him are stressful, and it’s not like he wants to wash out and lose his place there, but—

Sometimes it all feels like the walls are closing in around him, and he’ll be nothing more than the perfect cog in the Navy machine.)

He shakes his head and glances behind him, “Okay—I think we lost them in the confusion.”

“What even is the thing that they want?” Fuyumi asks, poking at the knapsack that Hawks’ no-good father had stuffed into his hands before abandoning them (as per usual).

Hawks shrugs. “Don’t know—daddy dearest didn’t tell me anything before running off to save his own skin. Looked kind of like a puzzle box? Except it’s a sphere.”

“Well—maybe let’s go to my lab then,” Fuyumi says. “We can examine it a bit, and I can set up a cot for you or something.”

“Alright,” Hawks says, turning the horses towards the scientific district. “It’s the least you can do, dragging me all the way out here.”

Fuyumi rolls her eyes, “I’m sorry about that, but then again—if I hadn’t come to see how you were doing, those pirates would have probably murdered you in your bed!”



"That's true," Hawks acknowledges. "So if the sphere unlocks to reveal some jewel or something, I'll give you like, 40% of the proceeds."

"I'd settle for just a warm meal—we didn't get to eat anything before the pirates burst in," Fuyumi mutters, drawing her shawl around her more closely. "We should report them, but I didn't get a good look at them—did you?"

"Nope," Hawks says, shaking his head. "Too much smoke, and too dark. Although—my no-good father did mumble something about 'beware the splicer' before he left, so maybe we should just keep an eye out for splicers."

"Lots of people have genetic enhancements though—even I have a little. A splicer in search of treasure," Fuyumi shakes her head. "It sounds like a bad penny dreadful."

"As if you don't eat those up," Hawks teases.

"And I've read enough of them to know that whatever the treasure is, we need to get rid of it quickly," Fuyumi says firmly.



The sphere clicks in Hawks' hands as he's fiddling with it (it seems to be some kind of puzzle—and suddenly, the room is filled with a holographic map, glittering with stars and far-flung planets.

Fuyumi's eyes widen as she spins around and reaches out to touch one of the planets, "Well that's—we're here at Montessor, and—"

The map suddenly starts moving, and planets and nebulae all zip by them.

"Cat Eye Nebula—the Kamino Systems—and that's—" Fuyumi's eyes grow huge behind her glasses as they stand in front of a planet with the legendary two criss-crossing rings. "That's—"

"*Treasure Planet*," Hawks breathes.

(What kid hadn't grown up on stories of the dread pirate All For One and his heinous crew that stole from everyone but always vanished without a trace?

A lot of people said Treasure Planet was nothing more than a legend but this map—plus the fact that pirates had actually wanted to kill him to get it—suggests otherwise.)

"No, All For One's trove? The loot of a thousand worlds?" Fuyumi asks, with her mouth gaping open.

"And all just a boat ride away," Hawks muses, tossing the sphere up.

Fuyumi stares at him with wild eyes, "Whoever brings back all that treasure would hold an eternal place in the pantheon of explorers! They'd be able to do whatever projects after that!"

"What happened to 'we need to get rid of it quickly'?" Hawks asks in bemusement.

"And let someone else find *Treasure Planet*?" Fuyumi rushes over to her desk to start rummaging through papers. "The discovery *alone* would be enough to probably give me enough sponsors to be able to open up an orphanage—much less 40% of the treasure."

"May have to divide it differently—we're definitely going to need a crew," Hawks points out.

Fuyumi waves a hand distractedly, "Fine, whatever, that can come out of your share—ask one of your Navy buddies, and of course you can't go by yourself. It's totally preposterous traversing the galaxy alone—that's why I'm going with you."

Hawks raises an eyebrow, "So—you're coming along?"

Fuyumi looks up at him with a flat stare, "Shouto's settled into school, Natsu is about to become a doctor, and mother—has been doing a lot better lately. I've been waiting my entire *life* for an adventure like this, and here it is *screaming*, 'Go Fuyumi, go Fuyumi!'"

(Their relationship is a sham so that both of them can seem respectable despite their taste in partners of the same sex, but that doesn't mean Hawks isn't fond of Fuyumi anyway.

She's worked so hard for her family—it would be nice to see her be able to cut loose a bit.)

Hawks chuckles, "Well—far be it from me to stand in the way of you and your dreams. I think—Miruko might be game."

"That's—the Lepus upperclassman who already made captain, right? She'd be fine just taking off on an adventure?" Fuyumi asks doubtfully, a slight dusting of pink appearing on her cheeks.

"If you bill it as an expedition and put in the right paperwork, I'm pretty sure she needs research hours anyway," Hawks says before leaning forward knowingly. "And you can finally get to know her instead of just staring at her."

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Fuyumi replies primly. "Well—I'll get those papers ready and then get a ship and crew, and you talk to Miruko, and hopefully soon—we'll be good to go!"

"Can't wait," Hawks says genuinely.

(The chance of a lifetime—

And maybe enough money even to buy out his indenture with the Navy if he wants to do something else with his life.

Although honestly, he really doesn't know what else he can do.

He likes helping people, he just—chafes at the system he's locked in.

But he's been part of it for so long that he's really not sure what else he is.

Still—it's not just Fuyumi who has been waiting her entire life for an adventure like this.)



After a month of making all the arrangements and getting to the Montessor space-port, Hawks takes them to their ship, the R.L.S. Legacy, and Miruko greeted them as soon as they arrived, leaping down from the top of the mast with a wide grin.

"Hawks! I've checked this miserable ship from stem to stern, and it's—not bad," she says, slapping him on the back. "You seem to have picked alright."

"Ah, that was Fuyumi," he replies, nodding to Fuyumi, dressed in an oversized, clanking spacesuit and just barely managing to keep from gaping at Miruko.

(He assumes it's the dashing cut of her coat or her boots.

He doesn't even *like* women, and he's fascinated by Miruko's boots.)

"Ah, Dr. Todoroki, your fiancée, I presume," Miruko says, turning to her and raising an eyebrow.

Fuyumi flushes, her hands twisting together a bit, "Yes—that's me," she squeaks out.

"...Can't quite believe you managed to nab such a beauty, Hawks," Miruko says, slapping Hawks on the shoulder again before dipping into a low bow before Fuyumi. "Captain Rumi Usagiya, otherwise known as Miruko, at your service, doctor."

"Pleasure to meet you, captain," Fuyumi says, somehow still managing to curtsy in her clanky space suit, although stumbling a bit while straightening up.

"Oh dear," Miruko says, quickly catching her by the hand so that Fuyumi doesn't tip over and grabbing the cords of her suit, "If I may doctor, this would work so much better—right way up and plugged in."

"Oh—thank you," Fuyumi blushes. "I—it's my first time traveling through space."

"Hawks, you're really depriving your fiancée here," Miruko comments, giving him a look.

Hawks shrugs, "She's been busy."

(He knows he's not coming off as the greatest fiancé here, but—

Miruko's eyes are already shining when she looks at Fuyumi, and honestly, if Fuyumi also starts to develop feelings and decides that with all the treasure she can say to hell with respectability and decide to abscond scandalously with Miruko—

He'd be happy for her.

Someone should be living a swashbuckling romantic life after all.)

"Yes," Fuyumi quickly agrees. "Although now with Treasure Planet—"

Miruko quickly covers Fuyumi's mouth with her hand and glances around.

"My apologies but—let's take this to my stateroom."

Miruko's stateroom is lavishly furnished, and she locks the door as she explains.

"Doctor. As brilliant as I am sure you are, I can't help but make this as clear as possible: I don't much care for this crew you hired. They're—I said something good this morning before coffee, what was it. Ah, a ludicrous, driveling pile of galoots."

Fuyumi draws herself up, her back stiff, "I beg your pardon—"

"It's not your fault! You don't have any experience in hiring a crew—Hawks really should have helped you there," Miruko reassures her, sending another piercing glance at Hawks.

(He really probably should have double-checked the crew Fuyumi got, but he had been a bit preoccupied with convincing Miruko to take a leave of absence to captain the ship while coming up with excuses for his own leave of absence that didn't involve talking about Treasure Planet.

He had at least checked the rates to make sure that Fuyumi wasn't getting ripped off, and the references had seemed fine, the Detnerat Company had vouched for them and everything.

Of course, references could be forged, and both of them really should have seen the crew in person first.)

Hawks held up his hands, "Sorry—anyone you want me to keep an eye on especially?"

"...the quartermaster keeps talking to himself, one of the engineers has a worrying amount of knives, and I'm pretty sure the navigator used to be a stage magician or something, but—the cook and his assistant seem particularly shady, and oddly in charge," Miruko muses. "You might want to check on them."

"Will do," Hawks nods.

"Also, hand over the map. We need to keep it under lock and key when it's not in use," Miruko says, extending a hand out.

Hawks somewhat reluctantly hands it over (he understands that it's not particularly safe on his body, and is so much safer locked up in Miruko's stateroom, but—he had liked keeping it close), and then heads down to the galleys.

He sees two figures down there, one leaning against a table and the other stooped over and complaining.

"—and why are you the head chef anyway?"

"Because out of the two of us, I'm the only one who can make anything without giving everyone diarrhea."

"...fine. But why the hell am I the assistant chef—"

"You'd rather be a cabin boy?"

"Fucking Dabi, I'm going to dust you—"

Hawks coughs, and both figures whirl around to stare at him.

The shorter man who had been complaining about being the assistant chef has white hair, red eyes, scarred and cracked lips, and has a distinctly unhealthy pallor to his skin. The taller man has black hair, turquoise eyes, and has some edgy black coat slung over the back of a chair.

What really catches Hawks' attention though is that said taller man has cybernetic tattoos glinting across the burn scars on his face, and that his arms while burned as well, carry the tell-tale spiral markings of splicer enhancements.

(Hadn't his father given him that cryptic warning about a splicer?)

"You want something?" demands the shorter man while the taller one simply leans back and looks at him.

"...hi, I'm Lieutenant Keigo Takami. Just checking that everything's good," Hawks says, laying on an easy tone while glancing around the galley.

(It's—actually very well-scrubbed and neat.

All the knives are laid out, the ingredients have already been neatly sliced, and the dishes carefully stacked.

So—shady but possibly still a good cook?)

"You're Hawks," the splicer says suddenly, narrowing his eyes. "Todoroki Fuyumi's fiancé."

"Yes?" Hawks says, thrown for a bit of a loop (generally when people identified him as Hawks, it was as the Navy's prodigy, not as Fuyumi's betrothed—but then again, Fuyumi was the one who had hired them). "That's me."

The man looks him over disdainfully before turning around, "She's too good for you," he sniffs.

"I'm well aware," Hawks says, extremely confused. "...do you know her? Who are you?"

(Oh god, didn't Fuyumi say she didn't have any ex-boyfriends?

Who was this guy?)



"...just a feeling," the splicer says, with a wave of his hand. "I'm Dabi. I'm the cook."

"...Dabi," Hawks repeats, looking him over (it's decidedly unfortunate that the man is exactly the type he likes—tall, lanky, hot, and with piercings and tattoos). "Well—not really disagreeing with you, even if it's weird for you to comment on it."

The other man snorts, his scarred lips twisting into a smirk while Dabi simply stares at him blankly.

"And you're the assistant cook?" Hawks asks, turning to the other man.

The man grimaces, and Dabi suddenly smirks, "Indeed he is. Shigaraki, and he's under training. Terrible at his job—probably only fit to scrub dishes for the time being."

Shigaraki looks as if he wants to murder Dabi, and Dabi looks smugly pleased with himself.

(What exactly is going on there? Obviously Shigaraki isn't normally the assistant chef—and even more obviously they know each other, and Hawks doubts that Dabi is normally the chef either.

And that's not even getting into whatever strange connection Dabi has to Fuyumi.

Miruko was definitely right to tell him to keep an eye on him.)

"Well—if you need some help, I suppose I can come by and do what I can," Hawks suggests with some false cheer.

"You?" Dabi asks, arching an eyebrow. "The Navy's prized high-flyer?"

(Who *is* this guy? He knows way too much.

He needs to ask Fuyumi again where she found these people.)

"Yeah, I had to peel a lot of potatoes before," Hawks replies with a shrug.

"Trying to learn how to cook?" Dabi sneers, turning around, and his hands flash as he takes out a cleaver and chops the vegetables with ease into a uniform pile.

"Got caught solar-boarding too much," Hawks admits, sliding his hands into his pockets and leaning back in what he hopes is a suitably louche fashion.

Dabi looks distinctly unimpressed, "I don't really see—"

"Well, if he's offering, go ahead then," Shigaraki interrupts, leaving both of them to head up the stairs. "I'm going to watch the take-off."

The two of them watch him go, and then Hawks turns to Dabi, "You're not going up to watch?"

"I've seen a lot of them," Dabi shrugs, waving a hand as some small blue flames spit out to light the stove. "Some of us actually have work to do here."

"Does that mean you don't want me to peel potatoes?" Hawks persists.

(Just to make it a little less obvious that he's there to investigate a bit.

And definitely not because it really does something for Hawks that Dabi's tattoos light up a bit when he's activating those flame genetic enhancements.)

Dabi pauses, glancing over at the mounds of potatoes in bags in the corner of the kitchen. "...you can't be worse than Shigaraki, I suppose," he finally says grudgingly. "You can stay as long as you're not underfoot."

"I will do my best," Hawks says, flashing one of his more charming grins.

(And hopefully he'll soon figure out what this guy's deal is.

He thinks there's a brig on this ship—and he guesses that'll have to do if necessary since it's not like they're going to be close to any Navy outposts on this journey.

He hopes it doesn't come to that.)



Some things he quickly discovers about Dabi, after making sure to swing by the galley at least once a day and try to peel some potatoes or whatever else needs to be done around the kitchen:

1. Dabi is genuinely a good cook. Like, Hawks had his doubts, but after taking a sip of the Bonzabeast stew he had whipped up, even if Miruko hadn't told him to keep an eye on things, he'd be slipping downstairs to try and steal some free samples. Dabi kept threatening to incinerate him, but it was worth it.

2. For all that Dabi is supposedly in charge of Shigaraki, Shigaraki seems to wander off to do whatever on a regular basis, which is why Hawks ends up helping chop vegetables or stir things or clean bowls more often than not. He's not especially good at it, but it does the job, and even Dabi is grudgingly pleased by his efforts.

3. Whatever genetic enhancements Dabi has are all centered around flame, and they seem to be a little overpowered for his body, given the way his hands smoke a bit after he throws around his blue fire. (He wonders if there's some kind of fireproof splice that could make up for that).

4. Dabi tries to stay below-deck and is completely allergic to the sight of Fuyumi, to the point that Fuyumi has never caught more than a passing glimpse of him and really wonders if Hawks is making up how weird this guy is about her. Fuyumi doesn't remember a guy like he describes, and all questions and comments about Fuyumi to Dabi are met with stony silence. Hawks is 95% certain though that Dabi isn't romantically interested in her, because any fake matchmaking attempts for the two of them are met with a mix of horror and disgust.

5. Dabi has a grudge a galaxy wide against the Navy. He sneers at any mention of it, he seems to grudgingly tolerate Miruko's presence, and he seems distinctly unimpressed by any of Hawks' Navy accolades (which is fine since Hawks isn't much impressed by them either). Hawks isn't sure if it has something to do with his burn scars or not, but there's definitely a story there.

6. Dabi actually has some really cool stories if Hawks manages to get him talking. It's a bit of work, that's for sure, and requires a lot of Hawks telling some of his own stories and bemoaning the state of the Navy (and is it bad that he doesn't find that very hard), but slowly—the man unwinds enough to tell him about sailing through the swirling, starry seas of the Cat's Eye Nebula and fighting against some pirates in the Kamino System (what were they doing in the Kamino System though? It's basically a system ruled by pirates)

7. And most importantly—Dabi's kind of a badass. While he lurks around the ship and isn't especially talkative, he handles the squalls of the ship with ease, and no matter what the other crew members throw at him, be it Toga the engineer casually looting his knives (what does that girl need with all those knives), Twice the other engineer panicking and rushing inside, or Mr. Compress the navigator demanding that they serve sushi, he stands his ground. Toga obediently hands over the knives when he glares, Twice gradually calms down with Dabi just settling him down in a corner and handing him some bread to munch on, and even though Dabi sneers at Mr. Compress, space-eels are wrangled with a blast of flame, and sushi is had.

He seems like enough of an even hand that when Miruko had decided they needed to scout out the route a bit, Hawks took him with him as part of the scouting party.

(It wasn't that strange if you thought about it since Miruko had to run the ship, Fuyumi couldn't actually operate the boat, Toga's knives worry him, Twice had to stay to keep Toga in line, Mr. Compress would probably want to do card tricks if they got stuck together too long, the quartermaster Spinner was busy, and good luck ever finding Shigaraki.

And if he wanted to see how Dabi would handle a boat—he wanted to see what the man was capable of.)

"Can you actually drive this thing?" Dabi asks caustically, flopping down in the boat with crossed arms and his edgy coat fanning out behind him.

"You're the one who keeps calling me the Navy's prized high-flyer," Hawks points out, prepping the launch mechanisms.

"I'm sure you can do stunts and flips and whatever in the Navy's gear, but with this tub of lard—"

The boat lurches into accelerating forward, and Dabi only manages to not completely fall over by banging into Hawks' side.

"You were saying?" Hawks asks, not able to suppress the grin on his face that the space wind in his hair brings.

(This is what he was meant for—

Pure flight.)

Dabi hauls himself back up and watches Hawks nimbly maneuver the boat to surf on a wave of stardust before accelerating out into space.

"...you deserve your reputation and nickname, I suppose," he finally says, grudgingly while running a hand through his dark hair and glancing down at the sensors. "Keep an eye out for singularities though—the readings look shaky."

"You think we'll get singularities all the way out here?" Hawks asks, carefully turning on some of the extra shields on the boat.

"You never know—we had a string of them when we were out in the Trigger System."

Hawks raises his eyebrows, "Isn't that Shie Hassakai territory?"

"Not anymore," Dabi smirks, leaning back.

(Shie Hassakai had been mostly taken down due to the Navy going in, but their leader had been intercepted and mangled during the transport back to headquarters by another rival pirate crew.

Based on eyewitness accounts and Overhaul himself, it was believed it was the mysterious League of Pirates who had attacked.

Now then—did that mean Dabi was involved with the League, or was he just someone who disliked Shie Hassakai?)

"Overhaul was a piece of work," Hawks comments, steering them further out into the expanse. "Had some kid with—not sure really, genetic enhancements or cyborg parts or something churning out weapons for him?"

"Overhaul was scum," Dabi says, his lip curling. "The whole system is better off without trash like that in charge there."

"You're not going to get an argument from me there," Hawks replies. "Although—you guys were in the Trigger System for a reason?"

"Had some business there," Dabi replies vaguely, crossing his arms.

"Your entire crew?" Hawks persists.

"Why? You looking for an opening?" Dabi tilts his head.

"What if I am?" Hawks asks, leaning forward a bit.

(It's a good ruse to get into Dabi's confidence, right?

It's not like he would really want to be a pirate—pillaging and running around the galaxy with no responsibilities and no one to call master but himself—

No, he needs to remember that even if he chafes at the duties the Navy places on him, he's been helping people in that role.

And it's not like he's good for anything else.)

Dabi's eyebrows rise as he stares at Hawks, "Leave your cushy Navy job for a position on just a regular, layabout crew?"

"I'm sure your crew has its—benefits," Hawks says, scooting a bit closer to him. "And—the Navy isn't as great as it seems. It's stifling sometimes, and I—it's not always easy being their poster boy."

"As you've said before," Dabi acknowledges, giving him a long searching look. "But—what about your fiancée? Who you should have taken out on this lovely little excursion?"

Hawks snorts, checking the sensors again. "You think a scouting mission is date material? Your sense of romance is truly dead."

Dabi raises his eyebrows. "And you have any? Since you've been here, I haven't seen you take out your fiancée once."

"Number one: flattered you're paying so much attention to me," Hawks says, batting his eyes at Dabi. "Number two: Miruko seems to have that covered."

Miruko had gone from shooting him puzzled, slightly dirty looks at his lackadaisical behavior towards his fiancée to constantly making it a point to ask Fuyumi about what new things she's discovered and teaching her how to do things on the ship while laughing and smiling at her. When he had asked Fuyumi how it was going, she had blushed and said that she may have let slip that their engagement was really just for respectability's sake and that she hoped the treasure from Treasure Planet would open up new horizons for her.

And really, he's happy for her—she deserves more than a sham marriage to him.

Dabi narrows his eyes at him, "...you are awfully pleased with the captain stealing your fiancée from right under your nose."

"I'm going to tell you something," Hawks decides (may as well—if Toga doesn't somehow already know and has told all the crew, then he doesn't have the right read on that girl). "The engagement is just for respectability's sake—we're friends, nothing more. Honestly—pretty happy she's found someone that suits her so well."

Hawks wishes he had thought to bring a camera with them to take a picture of Dabi's dumbfounded face. "You—wait, she's—huh. Then you're not—trying to marry her for her family name?"

"Is that what you think?" Hawks straightens up, actually a little bit offended.

"I'm not—the kind of person who does that. Like yeah, I climbed the ranks, but I worked hard to get there—not much of a choice—and really, we came to this ar-



rangement because she said her father was starting to make noise about marrying her off, and I was willing to let her do whatever after.”

Dabi’s mouth thins. “Fucking Endeavor,” he curses.

“You know him?” Hawks asks sharply.

Dabi pauses then stretches a bit, languidly, “Who doesn’t?” he asks simply.

(It’s true—who doesn’t know the Bonfire of the Navy, Admiral Enji Todoroki, also known as Endeavor?

Hawks had even happily read so many tales of his exploits as a child and had really been star-struck meeting the man in real life.

However—running into the rest of the Todoroki family later on had opened his eyes. The only reason the admiral’s wife wasn’t divorced from him was because she had been shut up in an asylum for many years, having broken down after the death of her eldest son and having attacked her youngest. Fuyumi and her remaining brothers had managed to bring their mother out of the asylum, but they were still working on separating themselves from their father’s influence.

That was when he had come in and offered to help because really—it leaves a bad taste in his mouth to have admired the man, and he admires how persistent the Todoroki family has been through all their hardships.)

“...he’s not as great as the stories sadly,” Hawks finally chooses to say carefully.

Dabi lets out an ugly laugh, “No shit. Doesn’t stop most people from trying to kiss his ass though and cover up stuff for him—but you’re trying to help Fuyumi out? But—if she runs off with Miruko after getting a ton of treasure, it isn’t going to look so respectable for you either.”

Hawks shrugs again, “I’ll worry about it if it comes to that—I mean, I could always play up the heartbroken role I guess, to explain why I’m not married. Could be fun.”

“...you’re not planning on ever getting married?” Dabi asks, his brow furrowed. “Commitment issues?”

“It’s more—the sort of person I would like to marry—I wouldn’t be allowed to within the Navy,” Hawks says, choosing his words carefully while keeping his eyes pinned on Dabi’s expression.

(Within the Navy, where he could get either severely reprimanded or kicked out, he could only hint and watch to see if other men shared his same proclivities.

Technically he supposes Dabi could also use this information against him—but that would be assuming the Navy would take the word of someone Hawks is pretty sure is a pirate.

And also—it isn’t as if he hasn’t noticed the way Dabi’s eyes occasionally linger on him.

He's willing to bet the splicer has certain interests in common with him.)

Dabi's brilliantly blue eyes go half-lidded as he smirks, "...well, I can't say I'm completely surprised."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Hawks asks, somewhat surprised (he had thought he managed to keep himself more or less discreet over the years).

Dabi waves a hand languidly, "I wasn't sure if you liked women or not—you always seemed pretty disinterested in your fiancée—but you do exude repressed Navy officer feelings quite a bit."

(Well at least thankfully Dabi doesn't seem to have noticed how hard it is for Hawks to tear his eyes away from the splicer's cybernetic tattoos and piercings and eyes as blue as the sea with the sun shining on it.

Look, he can't help it, he has a thing for tall, dark, and handsome, and the fact that he's probably a pirate doesn't make him any less hot.

And yes, he might be the splicer that he was warned about since despite what penny dreadfuls like to portray, full-out splicers are rare, but the sad thing is, the fact that he had probably been the one to light the inn on fire doesn't exactly either.

But okay, he thinks he's a repressed Navy officer—probably more willing to confide in him now maybe?)

"Well—yeah," he manages to say lamely. "So—there's that."

"...I thought being their prized flyer would merit something a bit better," Dabi finally says.

Hawks shrugs, "Sadly, no. Got indentured early and—hasn't been much of a choice from there on out. But enough about me—how did you get into the space-faring life?"

Dabi doesn't look inclined to answer, but after Hawks looks away from him to check the sensors again, he starts to slowly talk.

"I—had an accident. Nearly died—pretty much did. Scrabbled a life on the streets for a bit—then joined a crew. They're—kind of a messed-up bunch, but then again—so am I. You give up a few things, chasing a dream to change things."

(So—reading between the lines—

They want to use the treasure on Treasure Planet to change things?

And an accident—it must have been both bad and highly illegal to have resulted in burns like that—genetic enhancements were usually highly regulated and monitored to make sure everything was compatible with a person's genetic makeup and body.

Had he chosen it himself or had he been an experiment?

You heard rumors about those kinds of things—and to have survived after all that and to have apparently become some kind of feared pirate—

Despite himself, he has to admire that.)

“Was it worth it?”

Dabi shrugs, “I hope it is. So you—got indentured early to the Navy? So they just what—raised you and trained you? What about your family?”

“My family was all too happy to just leave me there,” Hawks says, not quite able to keep his hands from clenching at his sides. “They were well compensated for it.”

“...not much of a family then,” Dabi comments, his voice soft.

“Not much of one, no,” Hawks agrees before determinedly changing the subject (so what if even his parents didn’t want him?). “And you?”

“...my father’s a piece of shit, my mother’s the poor woman who was sold to him, and my siblings—deserve better than what they’ve got,” Dabi says, looking out into the starry seas, his hand resting on his propped up knee.

“How many siblings?” Hawks asks quietly.

“Three,” Dabi replies, a rare smile tugging at his mouth. “All younger—two brothers and one sister.”

“That sounds really nice,” Hawks says, drawing his knees in and hugging them.

(Watching Fuyumi with her brothers, Hawks has to say that one of the reasons he had offered to marry her had been because he would have become part of their family.

It had seemed so nice—to have some people at your side who knew what you had gone through and still had your back.)

“...they’re better off without me, but—yeah, they’re pretty great,” Dabi says softly, looking down. “They’ve been—doing well from what I hear.”

“You don’t ever go and see them?”

“Not a good idea,” Dabi says shortly, looking away.

(So—what does he know from all this?

Mostly that Dabi’s background—is kind of like what his could have been if he had been left with his dad.

He supposes he should be grateful to the Navy for taking him in, but with all they require from him, and all the dirty jobs he’s had to do for them—

It’s difficult.)

He shakes his head quickly to try and get rid of those depressing thoughts and then notices a roiling stream of stardust in the distance, the tail of a comet.

He grins.

(Something to cheer both of them up, and if it happens to show off his skills a bit—that's besides the point.)

"Hey, hold on and watch this," he says before switching to manual control of the ship, activating the thrusters, and sending them barreling towards the stardust crashing in the distance.

"Are you crazy?!" Dabi yells, clutching at the rails of the boat. "You're going to *overturn* us—or crash us *into the comet*—"

"Nope, watch and learn," Hawks replies before timing the perfect crest into the tail of the comet. He maneuvers them through each crash and turn of stardust until they're so close to the comet that they can feel the heat—and then he drops them down, glitters of light still shining in their eyes, as he deploys the solar sails to let them glide at a sedate pace.

He turns around as the wind ruffles through his hair, knowing that he is grinning wildly, "How was that?"

"...I can't believe I'm saying this, but I want to go again," Dabi admits, a wry grin pulling at his mouth.

Hawks laughs, "Knew it. Well, this tub probably can't handle another run this soon, but later—we'll see."

(It's dangerous how fun it feels to be with him.

But—Hawks has always flirted with the edge of danger.)



Hawks is starting to think that the scouting mission will be a quiet success (scouted out the area, check, made note of all space creatures, check, showed off his skills and potentially got closer to Dabi, check) when an alarm sounds shrilly from the sensors, and both of their heads immediately turn to look at the screen.

"Oh gods—the star Pelusa—it's gone *supernova*!"

"And if we're not careful, that thing is going to devolve into a black hole," Dabi snaps. "We need to head back *now*."

(It's strange that Dabi would know that—Hawks doesn't even know that, and he's been trained to spot these kinds of anomalies—

But then again on a pirate ship, probably everyone has to keep an eye out for danger.)

Hawks immediately starts directing their boat back towards their ship, activating all the thrusters he can while keeping them stabilized (he hopes he doesn't blow out the circuits of this boat).

They zoom back, and as soon as they dock, Hawks is leaping off to go find Miruko, while Dabi hurries off to Shigaraki's side.

(So perhaps—Shigaraki is the one in charge of all these pirates.

He doesn't have time to deal with that right now though.)

Miruko immediately starts shouting for people to gather up the sails while diverting all power to the thrusters, and Hawks joins the rest of the crew in the scramble up the mast to take down the sails.

They manage to take them all down before the supernova starts raining down fire on them, but then there's a shudder in the air, and suddenly a *pull*—

"Black hole!" Fuyumi yells out, clutching at the railing.

Both Miruko and Hawks run to take the wheel of the ship, Miruko pushing past him with a grunt as it nearly spins out of his hands.

"Blast these waves, they're so deucedly erratic!" she cries out.

"No captain, they're not erratic at all!" Fuyumi yells, jabbing at the sensors. "There will be another one in precisely 47.2 seconds, followed by the biggest magilla of them all!"

Miruko's ears rise as she flashes a brilliant smile. "Of course! Brilliant, doctor! We'll *ride* that last magilla out of here! Get those sails back up, Hawks!"

"Aye, captain! You heard her, hoist the sails!" he yells to the assembled crew.

The crew complains, but he scrambles up the mast again, while keeping an eye on safety lines, and they follow suit.

The sails go up, and it's as he's going down that he sees Twice stumble, teeter, then fall—

The safety line snaps taut, but that's when he notices that it's frayed (stupid, stupid, stupid, how had he not thought to go and check every component of the ship), and as each fiber begins to snap, he starts scrambling over, willing himself to be faster, but he already knows it's going to be too late—

Then Dabi grabs the line, starts trying to haul him up despite his spindly arms, and when he realizes the rope is about to snap, snarls, the spirals on his arms lighting up, and then a massive ball of blue fire goes hurtling into space, apparently hitting some ball of gas because there's a slight explosion, and Twice goes hurtling back up and into the ship again.

(Oh thank the gods.)

They drift closer to the black hole than Hawks is comfortable thinking about, before the last magilla sends them hurtling out, much like the way Dabi had managed with Twice.



(Thank the gods that Dabi had had the smarts to think of that while Hawks was just scrambling up there like a rookie idiot.

Some lieutenant or first mate he makes.

This many years in the Navy, and he didn't even think to double check the safety gear?

If his trainers could see him, he'd have been lashed until he was dripping with blood.

He'd done a pass at the beginning, but since then he's been lax—this is what trying to escape all those rules and regulations brings him to, unable to help or save anyone in the end—)

"Hey, are you okay?"

Hawks jerks up to see Dabi standing in front of him, looking down at him with a frown.

"Why are you just sitting there? Did you get hit by something?" he continues to ask, crouching down. "Let's get you to the medic—"

"I'm fine," Hawks says, jerking his arm away from Dabi's grasp. "I just—it's a good thing you were there. Smart thinking, really cool—not useless like—"

His mouth clicks shut as he scrunches his knees closer to his chest.

(It doesn't matter what he wants, does it?

So what if he feels trapped and constrained and stifled, what is his comfort compared to a life?

The Navy brings order and justice to a chaotic world, and they brought him up out of nothing, so shouldn't he be grateful to serve?

At least that way he could save people instead of just being a waste of space.)

"So what—you think that if you can't save someone, you're suddenly useless?" Dabi asks, frowning.

"You don't understand!" Hawks snaps, looking back up at him.

"Try me," Dabi replies, unruffled.

Hawks bites his lip.

(He should be careful he knows, around this splicer who could very well be a pirate who has already tried to kill him once, but—

If he doesn't talk, he's really afraid he's about to *cry*, and that would be even worse.)

"If I can't save someone—what is the point of me?" the words burst out of him.

"The entire reason I was taken in—the entire reason the Navy even deigned to

raise me—was because they thought they could make something of me—”

Dabi grabs him by the shoulders. “You *are* something—you’re stupidly brave and stupidly caring—why even get involved in the Todoroki mess—and you can fly like you were born with wings—you don’t have to be *useful* to justify just existing!”

(Is that true?

He’s—always had to earn his keep, earn his place, justify the cost that the Navy had already spent on him.

He wants so *badly* to believe what Dabi is saying—which is pathetic, why cling so desperately to the words of a no-good pirate?)

“Why are you being so nice to me?” he whispers. “Don’t you hate the Navy?”

Dabi’s eyes flicker, his scarred hands tightening around his shoulders. “Because—no one should have to prove that they somehow deserve to exist. And you—you could just be telling me what I want to hear—but I don’t think you’re faking being trapped the Navy. I think you really want out.”

“It doesn’t matter what I want,” Hawks says dully, looking down. “All I’m good for is following orders.”

“If that was really the case, then why are you on this ship and helping Fuyumi out?”

(That—

That is not a bad question.

Not the Fuyumi part—of course he’d help her out; even if he can’t help the shitty hand he was dealt, he can at least help her with hers, but all the rest—

Why is he here?

Because he wanted a chance to live his childhood dreams, and he also thought the treasure might be enough to buy out his indenture and let him live free—even if he doesn’t know what to do with that freedom.

It’s an illusory, terrifying idea.

But—was the terrifying unknown better than the boxed in and mapped out life he knew the Navy had in store for him for the rest of his years?

Could he really better the world on his own, or was the Navy right that he needed to have their direction and resources to really make a difference?)

“I—of course I have to help Fuyumi—the Todoroki family has already been through so much—and as for this trip—I don’t know really. I thought—I thought that I could wander out and free myself with the treasure and then figure out what to do after that—but maybe that’s a total pipe dream,” he says with a dark chuckle, running a shaky hand through his hair.

"It's not," Dabi says seriously. "That money—can definitely make a difference. And you—you don't need the Navy if all you want to do is help people."

Hawks looks up at him, "What do you think I can do?"

"I think you could probably do whatever you set your mind out to. You could rattle the stars, if only you take the helm and charter your own course—no matter what storms may come or nay-sayers there are," Dabi says fiercely, his fingers digging into his shoulders. "You were born to fly free."

(Oh.

This is bad.

This is so bad—but—

How could anyone not fall for that?

Even if he's just saying that—stars, how badly Hawks wants to believe him.)

"...thanks," he croaks, looking at Dabi's hands on his shoulders. "Thank you, I—I needed that."

Dabi blinks, seeming to finally realize how close they're standing, and drops his hands. "...well, I still need you, so—anyway. Get some sleep; there's a pile of potatoes with your name on them for tomorrow."

Hawks doesn't move from where he's standing, enjoying the other man's warmth (he'll take what he can get), and dredging up a small smile. "...shouldn't that be Shigaraki's job?"

"In any normal universe yes, but somehow even potatoes turn to dust in his hands," Dabi says in disgust.

"I know he's not your guys' cabin boy," Hawks says softly.

Dabi gives him a sharp glance, "...careful pretty bird, what are you implying?"

"...nothing," Hawks says finally (even if he's tired of all these half-truths and deceptions and schemes, this isn't the time to potentially trigger a ship-wide mutiny. Even if he feels closer to Dabi now, even if he wonders what it would be like to throw in with him—he's made certain promises, and he's going to keep them). "Just that Shigaraki is an awful cook's assistant."

Dabi sighs, "You're telling me—somehow I think he's even worse than you."

"Ouch, is that any way to treat the guy who's going to peel all those potatoes for you while also doing his job?" Hawks quips.

"First mates should make sure everything runs smoothly in a crew, and making sure we actually have food to eat is an important part of it," Dabi retorts back.

"True," Hawks says, looking up at him. "Also—it's nice spending time with you."

Dabi blinks, looking completely taken aback at that. "You—you need more people to hang out with."

"Probably also true," Hawks admits. "Although kind of a slam on Miruko."

"She should spend maybe a little less time flirting and a little more on her first mate about to break down," Dabi replies.

Hawks holds up a hand, "Okay—I panicked a bit, yeah, but it's not like she wasn't busy literally navigating the ship out of a *black hole*—oh man, I better go check on her and Fuyumi."

"Make sure nothing happens between them until your captain actually makes some guarantees or something," Dabi says darkly, stepping aside. "I don't trust her."

Hawks rolls his eyes, drawing away from Dabi's warmth. "Way to act like an over-protective big brother or something."

Dabi flinches and then turns away. "Just—you take care of yourself pretty bird, and make sure your fake fiancée is fine too."

(Well, there's an interesting reaction.

He needs to get Fuyumi in the same room or something as Dabi so maybe she can finally clarify what exactly is going on here.)



"I don't know," Fuyumi says doubtfully as she follows Hawks downstairs. "You keep saying he knows me, but I really can't think of anyone who matches who you're saying—"

"Which is why you need to get a good look at him without him ducking away," Hawks argues, shoving a barrel aside and gesturing for her to move in. "You hide here, and I'll bring him in."

Fuyumi gives him a flat look, "Just because you're weirdly obsessed with him doesn't mean I have to be—"

"Ah crap, he's coming," Hawks hisses, hearing footsteps. "Come on, hide, hide, hide!"

"Why are you squeezing in with me?" Fuyumi hisses back as Hawks shoves over the cabinet a bit to make room for himself as well.

"Because he's going to know I'm planning something if I'm just standing there without anything in my hands!" Hawks says, tucking himself into the spare space.

Fuyumi rolls her eyes, but she falls silent as more footsteps sound, and it seems that most of the hired crew has suddenly gathered down there.

"I say we move," Spinner grumbles.

"We don't move until we have the treasure in hand," Dabi drawls in a bored voice.  
(Well, well, well.

So it's going to be mutiny.

He can't say he's surprised at that, even if his heart sinks a bit.)

"We could just kill them all now," Shigaraki suggests.

"No," Dabi replies immediately, turning towards him. "You don't even know a thing about the map or the planet, and you want to kill everyone? We didn't work this hard to get here just for you to decide to kill off the only people who might know something about how to find the fucking treasure your creepy captain hid."

"Strong talk, but I know otherwise," Shigaraki sneers, glaring at Dabi. "It's that *Hawks*. Seems like you have a soft spot for him."

Dabi leans forward and snarls, "I care about one thing and one thing only; *vengeance*. You think I'd risk it all for some shitty Navy officer?"

"What was it now?" Shigaraki asks, his voice sickly sweet and his hands coming up to clasp each other. "You could 'rattle the stars if you would chart your own course'?"

"Shut the fuck up," Dabi snaps. "I cozied up to him to keep him out of the way, but that's all. You think he means anything to me?"

(No.

No, Hawks knows he has never meant much to anyone.

Not to his parents, not to his handlers, not to the man he had stupidly fallen for it seems.

Why had he ever thought otherwise?

And—why should he feel betrayed anyway?

Wasn't this exactly what he had been doing with Dabi, getting close to him to try and figure out his plans? He can only blame himself for developing feelings when all along, they were supposed to be just playing each other.)

Fuyumi suddenly starts and moves as if to reach out before Hawks quickly grabs her arms and shakes his head.

"Don't," he mouths. "Not worth it."

Fuyumi also shakes her head, her face stricken and her voice the barest whisper, "No—you don't get it—that's not—"

"*Planet ho!*"

All the pirates in the hold look up and scramble as one up the stairs, even Dabi who seems to linger for a bit before moving with the crowd.



As soon as he leaves, Fuyumi pushes herself out of their hiding place, biting her lip and wringing her hands together.

"Hey," Hawks says weakly, also pushing himself out of the crevice despite how much he wants to just sink into it, "I know what he said was rough, but it's not anything I didn't know before—"

"What?" Fuyumi asks, giving him a wild-eyed look. "Oh—I don't think he meant it, and you two should talk it out later—whatever's going on with you two, but I can't deal with that right now—that was Touya."

"Who—wait, your older brother? The one that *died*?"

(That didn't make any sense—

Except that it did when you added together his extreme flame genetic enhancements, the scars, the weird resemblance that had kept bothering him, the way he was so protective over Fuyumi, his own fucking story about having siblings and being in some kind of accident—

Shit.

Oh *shit*.

*Fuck*.

Endeavor was even worse than he had thought.

And—he'd been flirting with Fuyumi's *brother* this entire time?

No, no, no, focus Hawks—and not on your own heartbreak, that's—that hurts, but—if there's one thing the Navy taught him, it was how to breathe through the pain and focus on the mission at hand, which right now, was just getting out of this situation alive.)

"We—we all thought he did—Touya's enhancements were so strong but never completely compatible with his body, but father still pushed him so hard—and one day it all went terribly wrong—we never even found the body..." Fuyumi whispers.

Hawks bites his lip and then shakes his head and states, "What we have on our hands right now is a mutiny, so we need to deal with that first before we deal with your long-lost brother."

(So what if his heart might be breaking and he feels like screaming, he needs to secure the ship and the treasure first, and then—

And then hopefully by then he'll have figured out what to do.)

Fuyumi blinks and then drags him by the arm up the stairs, "Right, come on, let's—"

"Going somewhere?" Dabi asks silkily, appearing at the top of the stairs.

They both stare wide-eyed at him for a second before Fuyumi strides forward, poking a finger into his chest.

"I don't know what the *hell* you think you're doing Touya—letting us all think you're dead, joining a bunch of *pirates*, apparently seducing Hawks when he's supposed to be my fiancé—"

"Fake fiancé," both Hawks and Dabi blurt out at the same time.

"...and you even know that. Gods, this is worse than I thought," Fuyumi says, shaking her head. "But anyway—and now you want to steal a bunch of treasure to what—somehow get revenge on *father*?"

"He has to *pay* for what he did to all of us," Dabi snarls, his eyes intense. "He's still walking around in the Navy with all those people looking up to him and not knowing who he really is—"

"And what about the rest of us?" Fuyumi asks fiercely. "How does the rest of your family factor into your revenge?"

Dabi's mouth opens then clicks shut.

"Did you even think about us?" Fuyumi presses on. "Did you even wonder what we were doing—"

"You have no *idea* how much I thought about you guys or missed you all," Dabi snarls.

"Just not enough to come back to us."

Hawks stands there watching them glare at each other and weighs his options.

(Well this—is intense and moving and weird, but—

But they have a mutiny to either stop or report or whatever, and if Hawks can put aside his broken-up feelings, then Fuyumi can also have her dramatic family confrontation after they get that taken care of.)

Hawks steps forward, hand going toward the sword at his side. "Hate to interrupt but—unless you're about to turn yourself in, step aside."

Both siblings turn around to stare at him.

"...are you about to try and *arrest* him?" Fuyumi demands.

Dabi runs a hand through his dark, messy hair. "Hawks—look, I don't know how much you heard but—I had to say those things alright—"

"Right, like the way you had to cozy up to me?" that bitter question slips out before Hawks can grab it back.

Dabi winces. "I—you—the plan wasn't—you weren't supposed to be—"

"Save it," Hawks says, holding up a hand and looking away with a harsh laugh.

"It's not like—I wasn't trying to do the same with you, even if you seemed to see through me."

Dabi's expression twists, but then Fuyumi sighs.

"Touya is a massive idiot who said some very hurtful things, but I think he didn't mean them because he had that tone of when he's fronting," Fuyumi declares, crossing her arms. "And Hawks is now just saying that to lash out a bit, I'm pretty sure."

Hawks gives Fuyumi a betrayed look, but Dabi while looking distinctly taken aback at her words, doesn't contradict her.

(Then—

What is that supposed to mean?

That maybe he was part of a plan the same way he had cozied up to Dabi—but maybe Dabi is finding it as hard to go against him as he is now?)

"And if he doesn't help us prevent this mutiny, I'm telling mother," Fuyumi adds.

"Is she—is she alright now that she's out of the asylum?" Dabi asks hesitantly.

Fuyumi's face softens a bit before hardening again. "She is—although you would have known that and could have helped with the transition process if you had been home."

"Do you know what that money from Treasure Planet can *do*, Fuyumi? We can *finally* bribe all those people who were doing his dirty work for him or hiding things for him to leak the information out into the public, we can hire lawyers to take our case, we can grind his reputation into *dust*—and when that's done, when he sees everything he worked for come to a ruin, then I can come in and end him."

"And again—what after that? What are the rest of us supposed to do with that mess?" Fuyumi demands. "And what's your crew planning to do with their share of the treasure?"

"They have their own axes to grind against the Navy," Dabi says ominously.

Fuyumi scowls. "Leaving aside the fact that you're about to commit *mutiny* against Miruko, and that you *attacked* me and Hawks for the map at the Benbow Inn—"

"I didn't know it was you!"

"Funny how much collateral damage piles up in your pursuit of vengeance, huh Touya?"

"Look—I'll help you guys get off the ship, alright?" Dabi hisses desperately, looking around the hold. "Just leave the map, and I'll make sure later you get a share—"

"Oh fuck you Dabi," Hawks cuts in angrily, finally unsheathing his sword and holding it out in front of him. "I was the one who unlocked the map, Fuyumi's the one who decoded it, so like *hell* do you get to just swoop in and leave us your left-

overs—”

“Then fine, take the map with you and go—I’ll figure out how to find you guys later,” Dabi snaps, stepping aside from the stairs.

“...you’re letting us go just like that?” Hawks asks, suspiciously, not lowering his sword.

(Is this some kind of ploy?

But his sister is here, so maybe not...)

“I’m not about to let any of you get hurt, so—yeah. The treasure—well, all we have to do in the end is follow you anyway, but you need to cooperate and get off this boat to make that happen,” Dabi says, walking over to the pantry and gathering some bread and other dried goods to stick into a rucksack.

“So what, you’ll ambush us on the planet, and that somehow makes things better?”

Dabi shoves the rucksack into his hands, glaring at him. “We’ll figure it out when we get there, the most important thing first is that both of you get off of this ship *now*.”

Hawks looks down at the food and then back up at Dabi.

(Can he trust him?

Common sense would say no—he’s a dirty pirate who’s about to mount a mutiny and who fully admitted to wanting to take the treasure for himself to get revenge on the Navy.

But—he’s Fuyumi’s brother. Surely he won’t hurt her deliberately?

And—as for what the two of them are—that’s probably a question that can only be answered in a situation where they’re not inches away from getting possibly slaughtered by pirates or having the entirety of Treasure Planet yanked from their grasps.)

“...fine,” he says finally, lowering his sword. “We’re leaving for the planet, you—I don’t trust you, but we’ll see after all this.”

“I’ll distract them, and then you guys go,” Dabi replies, turning to go up the stairs, his edgy black coat flaring out behind him. “Keep her safe, pretty bird.”

Fuyumi reaches out to grab him, but Dabi is gone before she can, and Hawks manages to hold her back until he hears the voices recede upstairs.

“Alright—let’s find Miruko, and then I can pilot one of the boats down to the planet,” he says hoisting the rucksack over his shoulder and letting go of Fuyumi.

Fuyumi turns to glare at him, “This is a terrible plan!”

“Yeah, but it’s your brother’s plan, and the only one we have right now,” Hawks

says as he turns towards the captain's quarters. "You want to tell Miruko, or should I?"

"...I better do it," Fuyumi says, biting her lip. "I think—Rumi might like to hear it better from me."

"Oh wow, it's *Rumi* now is it?"

Fuyumi swats his shoulder as she walks forward, "I don't know how you have the mood to tease," she grumbles.

(It's more like it's a distraction from the mess he's made of his personal life.

Why did he fall for a pirate?

Dabi seemed to sort of care for him—but how much really when push came to shove?)

He shakes his head and focuses on following Fuyumi to the captain's quarters.



Miruko has to be talked down from outright attacking the pirates ("On *my ship*? I'll see them hang!"), only conceding to their greater numbers and sneaking down to the scouting boat by Fuyumi confessing that one of them was her brother and that she doesn't want him dead.

"Okay hang on, let me see if I can get this straight," Miruko says, holding up a hand as the boat enters the atmosphere of Treasure Planet. "That splicer cook—he's *your* brother, and he's been busy seducing Hawks?"

"You make it sound so much more sordid than it is," Hawks mumbles defensively as he pilots the boat down.

"She really isn't, it's pretty much that way," Fuyumi retorts. "Wait, did you tell him you were my fake fiancé?"

"You think he'd have been trying to cozy up to me otherwise?" Hawks protests.

"You trusted him that much already?"

"It wasn't—I was—didn't you say you didn't have time to worry about stuff like that?" Hawks demands, grasping at straws.

"That was when I had *just* found out my deceased older brother was actually very much alive and running around as an edge-lord pirate!"

"Well, you probably still need time to process, so let's not talk about that—"

"Takami Keigo, what exactly are your intentions towards my brother?" Fuyumi demands.

Hawks gapes at her, "...are you *seriously* asking me that right now?"



"Soon we'll be fighting for our lives to get to the treasure against the dastardly pirates my brother has decided to involve himself with, so I think this is the perfect time to ask!" Fuyumi retorts, crossing her arms.

"It's as good of a time as any," Miruko offers.

Hawks glares at her, "Turncoat," he accuses. "Suck-up."

Miruko tips her hat at him, "Answer the lady's question, Hawks."

"...look, I don't know, okay?" Hawks says, throwing up his hands as they landed among some weird spore-like trees. "He's—well obviously he's a pirate. And apparently he wants revenge against the Navy and your father—which fine, whoever covered up his crimes should be tried and punished, so I'm not against that—but he wants the treasure to do that, and it sounds like he's willing to give up a lot of things for that."

"But he does seem to have a soft spot for you," Fuyumi points out.

Hawks lets out a bitter chuckle, drawing his knees in closer to his chest. "Yeah, we'll see how long that soft spot lasts when it goes against something he actually wants," he says tiredly. "I wouldn't count on that—better to rely on his affection for you, you're actually his sister."

Fuyumi has an odd look on her face, "...I may not know my brother very well as he is now, but I think—Touya was never very casual in his affections."

"Yeah? You also mentioned before that he was a total pushover before, and look at him now."

"Touya always got pushed around a lot, that's true, but he also always got up again—even when we thought he hadn't that last time, it turns out that he did," Fuyumi looks down then looks back up at him. "So I think if he's decided that you're worth keeping safe, he won't change his mind about that. He's stubborn like that."

"It must run in the family," Hawks snarks. "I'll just—let's focus on getting to the treasure first, okay? And we'll worry about your edge-lord pirate brother when he shows up again."

"We need a more defensible position. We should scout ahead—did you hear that?" Miruko demands suddenly, her ears standing up on end.

Hawks immediately looks around (Lepus' ears are notoriously good), but the thick, shadowed underbrush covers up everything.

"I don't see—"

Yellow eyes rise out of the darkness and looms before them in a haze of purple and black and—a waistcoat?

"Oh, this is quite wonderful!" the dark waist-coated smoke monster floats up to them, completely disregarding the sword and pistol Hawks and Miruko point at it.

"Carbon-based lifeforms come to rescue me at last! What year is it? Has the Navy grown much in these years that have passed? Have new nebulae and galaxies been explored and opened up—"

"Who are you?" Miruko demands, clicking the safety off her pistol.

"Oh my apologies, I've just been marooned for so long...I am—um. My name is—uh. Hm..." the smoke man pauses, and drifts slowly in front of them for a bit.

The three of them exchange looks, Miruko making circling motion around her ear, Fuyumi lightly shoving her, and Hawks keeping his sword pointed at the man.

"Kurogiri!" the smoke man finally exclaims, clapping his hands together. "Or at least—that was the name Captain All For One gave me..."

Hawks' eyes widen, "You knew Captain All For One?"

(The legends did say that Captain All For One had a crew of monsters—whether they had been genetically modified or bred that way, no one had been certain.

So this guy—was one of the last remaining crew?

He seemed much friendlier than Shigaraki, that was for certain.)

"But that means—you've got to know about the treasure?" Fuyumi asks, leaning forward.

Kurogiri's two glowing yellow eyes narrow, "The treasure?"

"Yeah—the loot of a thousand worlds?" Miruko prompts.

"Treasure—it's all a little—**fuzzy**—" Kurogiri's form seems to flicker as his voice suddenly goes mechanical. "Wait I remember—treasure—it's buried—buried in the **centroid—centroid—centroid of the mechanism**—and there was a big door, opening and closing, and *opening and closing*—but he didn't want anyone to find it so I helped him—**unauthorized access—reboot—reboot**—I'm sorry, who are all of you again?"

They all stare at the man, then huddle together.

"Should we trust him?" Fuyumi frets, adjusting her glasses. "He seems—friendly."

"Friendly as long as whatever programming All For One stuck on him isn't activated maybe," Miruko points out, glancing uneasily over her shoulder.

"He still probably knows the planet since he's been stuck here so long," Hawks points out. "We can just try to keep a close eye on him maybe and—get our bearings at least."

"Oh are you trying to find something on this planet?" Kurogiri asks politely, hovering over their shoulders. "Well, I certainly know this place very well! Did I already introduce myself?"

"...yes. Kurogiri, right?" Miruko asks, standing up and lowering her pistol, although

still not turning the safety back on. "I'm Miruko, she's Fuyumi, and he's Hawks. Do you have a place where we can get some cover? We have some pirates after us."

"Oh my, pirates! Yes indeed, right this way," Kurogiri says, ushering them forward through the gloomy spore forest. "Although, I myself was a pirate of sorts I suppose...although I didn't much enjoy those parts, my prime directive was to watch over Shigaraki."

They all stop to stare at him again.

"...you know *Shigaraki*?" Hawks demands.

"More importantly—you raised him?" Fuyumi asks, her eyes wide. "Is he All For One's son?"

"Adopted I think. It's all a bit—hazy for me as well," Kurogiri replies, his form blurring again a bit before he refocuses. "You all know him? How is he? I do hope he is doing well...I have been stuck here so long...I wasn't sure if he was still alive or not."

"He's good," Hawks manages to say.

(They could just leave out the fact that he was a murderous pirate captain for now.

Who knows, maybe Kurogiri would approve of that, and then decide to take them down for his prime directive.

But no—think Hawks, you can make this work for you.)

"...would you like to see him again?" he asks, despite Fuyumi's elbow digging into his ribs.

Kurogiri's yellow eyes seem to glow brighter and then curve into crescents. "Would I? Very much so! Is he also from the run from these pirates you speak of?"

"...in a manner of speaking, sure," Hawks continues. "He'll be here soon anyway. We can talk with one of his—friends, and we can see about staging some kind of reunion, how about that?"

"That sounds absolutely wonderful!" Kurogiri says cheerfully. "Let me take all of you to my abode first—ah, I should perhaps try to gift-wrap some of the little games I made for Shigaraki while I was stuck here..."

As Kurogiri happily burbles away, Fuyumi hisses at Hawks, "What are you *doing*?"

"Finding an angle and using it," Hawks hisses back.

"...well, you were always the tricky one," Miruko shrugs as they keep following Kurogiri. "Let's see what you've got. Sure hope Fuyumi's right about your Dabi though."

"He's not mine, and—I think I can make this work. We'll all get what we want, and it's not that crazy if we play all our cards right," Hawks argues.



"You're crazy," Dabi says flatly, having somehow made his way down to the planet on another scouting boat, looking from him to Kurogiri and back. "You think that what—offering Shigaraki his old cyborg nanny will somehow persuade him to not take all the treasure and kill you?"

"Well then hot stuff, what is your brilliant plan?" Hawks shoots back. "How did you even find us anyway?"

"I may have stuck trackers on all the life-boats," Dabi admits.

Fuyumi sucks in a breath and glares at him. "Planning a mutiny from the start, were you?"

"Helped in this case, didn't it?" Dabi asks, then leans against the rusty wall. "And my plan—you sure you don't want to give up that map?"

"Yes," all three of them say simultaneously.

"Then the best plan is for you all to find the treasure before Shigaraki does so you can at least take some of it and then go," Dabi says.

"And I suppose all of you will just be taking all the rest after that?" Miruko asks, buffing her nails against her coat and giving him a look of distaste.

"If you've got a better plan than that, let's hear it," Dabi snaps, glaring at her.

"All of this is pointless posturing without knowing where the treasure actually *is*," Fuyumi cuts in. "As long as we hold the key to that, Shigaraki can't do a thing to us—"

"Pardon me, but I can't help but think that perhaps Shigaraki has taken somewhat of a wrong turn in his life," Kurogiri interrupts, setting down a fancy tea-set on a silver tea tray in front of them.

He offers some kind of cracker to Dabi. "Since you are his friend, I must ask—is he a pirate now?"

"We're not friends," Dabi immediately says, staring dubiously at the cracker.

"And—yeah. What, you got a problem with it?"

Kurogiri's head tilts to the side. "Well—he is following Captain All For One's plans, although I did hope otherwise—but it's good he has friends now, I suppose. Will he be arriving soon?"

"Yeah, did you lead them to us?" Miruko asks, with her arms crossed.

"Why would I let all of you go just to lead them here?" Dabi demands. "I could have just let them capture you on the ship."

"You could just be waiting for us to unlock the map, then snatch it up and call in

your crew," Miruko argues.

"And let my sister get killed?" Dabi asks, shaking his head, "No way."

"If they're such a blood-thirsty bunch, why did you even bother throwing in with them?" Fuyumi demands.

"...sometimes you have to get your hands dirty. They're a mess, but they can get things done," Dabi says slowly, his hands in his pockets. "And—I think I can probably get them to let you off, but only if the treasure is in hand."

"Then we're at an impasse here," Hawks says, folding his arms as well.

Kurogiri's nails clink against the tea-cup. "Well—this seems a difficult matter. I'll just pop out through the secret passageway and see if I can find Shigaraki myself perhaps—"

"Secret passageway?" Hawks asks, turning to the shadowy man.

Kurogiri nods, walking over to a spherical thing in the center of the room and shoving it so that it turns and suddenly reveals a hole that leads down to what looks like thousands of pipes and gears and other mechanisms in a vast space.

"It's a short-cut to other places on the planet," Kurogiri explains cheerfully, gesturing down at it. "I've set up little notices for myself so it's easier to get around."

"...we can use this," Hawks says, staring down into the echoing space (how big is it? Does that mean this planet is really just one massive machine? But after all, looking at Kurogiri, it did seem that All For One had had technology beyond the pale). "We can—we can stay down here looking for the treasure while Dabi, you can bring Shigaraki back here to see Kurogiri. That should distract him for a while, at least hopefully enough for us to find the treasure."

"And then what?" Miruko prompts. "I think we still have a conflict of interest here. What is it that you really want to see happen here, Dabi?"

"...I want all of you alive. And I want enough treasure for our plans to go forward," Dabi says after a moment of silence.

"...I suppose that'll have to do," Miruko decides. "I'm not a fan of this whole 'overthrow the Navy' schtick you guys have going on, but it isn't as if the Navy couldn't stand to be reformed. Although if you threaten innocent lives, I'll be there to end you."

Dabi snorts, "Innocent lives are sparse where we tend to go. Do we have a deal then?"

Miruko turns to Hawks and Fuyumi. "You two are the ones who know him best. What do you think?"

"Touya, if you don't follow through, I will never forgive you, *and* I'll tell mother," Fuyumi immediately says.



Hawks takes a breath (how many options do they really have right now anyway?)  
“I think—”

“Well, well, well, look what we have here.”

They all whirl around to see Shigaraki sauntering through the door, blaster at the ready, and the rest of his crew following in behind him.

(Betrayed by Dabi again, why had he ever trusted him—

But no, Dabi looks surprised too.

Perhaps Shigaraki hadn’t trusted him very much either after their escape.)

“Good job, Dabi,” Shigaraki says idly as Dabi steps in front of Fuyumi. “Not that you did it for us but—you did get us to the map, so that works out. However, you also *lied* to us, so we’ll have to do something about that.”

Dabi gives Shigaraki a savage smile that looks more like him baring his teeth than anything else. “Try me.”

“We’ll leave your sister off, we’re not complete monsters after all,” Shigaraki says, gesturing to Spinner who steps forward with a blaster to hand to Dabi. “But these Navy officers—well, we can’t have them running back to the admiralty and blabbing all about us, can we? Finish them off, Dabi, and all will be forgiven.”

Dabi takes the blaster from Spinner, and Hawks’ heart sinks.

(He’s stupid, of course Dabi would turn on them as long as Fuyumi’s safety was ensured.

What did he think, that he was special to him or something?)

Hawks is about to unsheathe his sword when suddenly Dabi shoves Fuyumi towards Hawks, runs over, grabs Kurogiri in a chokehold, and points the blaster at his smoky head.

“Anything happens to them, your old nanny won’t make it either,” he rasps out threateningly.

(Then—

Does that mean Dabi is actually making a stand here?

Choosing him?

Hawks, focus—he could worry about exactly what that entailed later when their chances of survival were perhaps a bit better.

Taking a hostage is good, but how is this going to go?)

Shigaraki’s eyes widen as he takes in Kurogiri. “...Kurogiri? What—I thought you were *dead*—”

“Just stuck here sadly,” Kurogiri says calmly, as though he was discussing the

weather and a blaster wasn't pointed at his head. "Hm, it seems you're in a bit of an impasse here, Tomura."

"You think? Get out of there, Kurogiri and take out this traitor while you're at it," Shigaraki commands.

Kurogiri tilts his head. "Hmm...I don't think I want to."

"What?"

"Well Tomura, things have not quite progressed as I had hoped for you, and I personally don't wish to see these fine Navy officers killed," Kurogiri says, looking around. "It would bring more trouble to you, and they haven't actually seemed to have done anything wrong."

"Kurogiri—you—you of all people know what I was meant for," Shigaraki says, a pleading note entering his voice. "And I'm so *close*—"

"I never agreed with the captain about that," Kurogiri interrupts, his voice also hardening a bit. "I couldn't do much about it at the time, but—since some of my circuitry has been removed, it appears that some of the restraining bolts on me were taken out as well. So I can now say to you Tomura—you don't have to be what the captain wanted you to be. You can be yourself."

Shigaraki's face scrunches up a bit. "I don't even know what that *means*," he says, his hand shaking on his blaster. "You—you can't just show up and say stuff like that now when you've been gone for so long—"

"I'm sorry about that," Kurogiri says sincerely. "I wanted to be there for you—truly I did. And I still can be after this, as long as you come to an agreement with all these people, including your rather threatening friend here."

Shigaraki stares at Kurogiri for a long time, scratching at his neck before finally—he lowers his blaster.

"Fine," he spits out, glaring at all of them. "We can—share or whatever, I guess."

"Your word as bond, Tomura," Kurogiri prompts.

"My word as bond," Shigaraki intones.

At that, the other pirates seem to relax a bit, powering down their weapons, Twice even dabbing at his eyes with a handkerchief Mr. Compress had handed them. Miruko still has her hand on her blaster though, and Hawks follows suit, not taking his hand off his sword and keeping his eyes pinned on Dabi.

"...you're a really helpful hostage," Dabi comments, letting go of Kurogiri.

Kurogiri adjusts his waistcoat a bit. "Thank you, although I think it is only fair to let you know that I could have gotten out at any point, and you would not have been able to stop me."

"...noted," Dabi says, sliding a glance over at Hawks before awkwardly coming over

to stand by him. "...hey."

"Hey," Hawks parrots back, looking up at him. "You—thank you for that. You could have just—taken the deal."

Dabi shakes his head, his blue eyes intense on his. "No, I couldn't have. Fuyumi would have never forgiven me, and—and I wouldn't have been able to live with myself after that."

(This— isn't a love confession.

But it feels like one.)

"I can't believe you betrayed us for some bird dick," Shigaraki mutters, scuffing the ground with his shoes.

"I think it's cute," Toga coos, twirling her knives around in her hands. "He offered to kill someone for him! It doesn't get more romantic than that."

"Very romantic—but kind of disturbing!" Twice pipes up. "I'm glad we didn't have to kill them though—but I would have if we needed to!"

"As charming as all of this is, I have to ask—where's the treasure?" Mr. Compress asks, doffing his hat at Kurogiri. "Forged documents didn't come cheap you know. And wreaking havoc against the Navy is expensive business as well."

"If you could ask your new boyfriend if he would kindly open up that map of his and get us to the actual treasure, that would be much appreciated," Shigaraki says acidically to Dabi.

"Excuse me, but as grateful as I am that Dabi didn't choose to let you kill me and Hawks—although by the way, you would have suffered major losses too in a fight against us—I am still his captain, and I'll be giving the order, thank you very much," Miruko pipes up.

"Aye-aye, captain," Hawks says, saluting Miruko, mostly just to piss Shigaraki off.

Shigaraki glares as Miruko beams. "Well then," she says, her ears twitching, "Here's what we're going to do in an orderly fashion..."



Things start off relatively orderly, with Hawks unlocking the orb, and a flashing line taking them to the center of the planet where he figures out he needs to wedge the orb into a crevice, which makes a flashing door with a holo-map pop up, and Fuyumi is the one who figures out that they need to select Treasure Planet itself to access the door to the loot, but from there—

Well, they probably should have taken heed of the ominous words Kurogiri had been spouting from the start.

"So that's why he got rid of my memory core despite it also breaking the control

block!” Kurogiri exclaims cheerfully as things begin exploding around them. “He wanted to make sure I couldn’t tell anyone the treasure was booby-trapped!”

“Less talking, more hauling!” Shigaraki screams, frantically helping his crew pile the tiny orbs that Compress had shrunk chunks of the treasure into onto a boat that Hawks is scrambling to fix up. “Can you hurry that *up*?”

“Would go a lot faster if you didn’t keep screaming at him,” Dabi snaps, helping Hawks weld some more engines to the ship.

“How long do we have until the whole place blows up?” Fuyumi urgently asks Kurogiri.

Kurogiri tilts his head, “Calculating—approximately ten minutes until complete destruction of the planet!”

“Ten *minutes*? We’ll never make it out of here in time!” Spinner says in horror, glancing around.

Hawks narrows his eyes. “...that map and door can go anywhere, can’t it?”

“Indeed!” Kurogiri answers.

“I see—then let’s set it to Montessor and head back through it,” Miruko decides, poking at the ancient control panel on the ship to start it up. “I can navigate us out and back in—but someone will need to take a hoverboard or something to hit the map.”

“I can do it,” Hawks immediately says, grabbing a long broken-off piece of metal and another broken-off engine.

Dabi immediately grabs his arm, “You’re *what*?”

“I’m the best flyer here, so I’m the best choice,” Hawks argues, looking around for some rope to try and secure the engine (this was going to be tricky...).

“You can’t just—”

“Hot stuff, if we want a chance to talk through—everything later, then I’m going to have to make sure there *is* a later for us to talk through,” Hawks says, reaching out and lightly cupping Dabi’s hand in his cheek. “Okay?”

Dabi has a stricken expression on his face, and he opens his mouth as if to protest, but in the end he just huffs out a breath, and crouches down, his implants lighting up as he uses his flame enhancements to weld the engine to the long piece of metal.

“You—better come back,” he says gruffly, gripping his wrist tight.

Hawks flashes a grin at him (even though they may be about to die—he’s glad he’s managed to at least have this moment with him). “Relax—remember, you were the one who said I was born to fly.”

Dabi pulls him forward, and before he knows what is happening, Dabi’s lips brush

against his harshly (oh my gods, is this really happening right now—he thinks he could soar without even a hacked-together solar-board with just this—), and then the other man steps back.

“Now you have to come back if you want more,” he declares arrogantly, although his cheeks seem to be stained pink.

“Now I definitely do,” Hawks answers, touching his mouth with his fingers (they *burn*).

“Sometime in the next century before we *all blow up* would be good, thanks,” Shigaraki yells, making a face at them.

As Dabi snarls at him, Hawks tips off the side of the boat, and it’s—

Well it’s certainly like no other flight he’s done before, swooping up and down, dodging explosions and hurtling debris, and there’s a close call with the engine nearly dying out, but he manages to ignite it again by catching it against a hunk of metal he’s hurtling down, and as he zooms up again, he sees Miruko turn the boat around to head back, and he reaches out to touch Montessor on the holo-map just as they’re approaching the portal engulfed in flames—

And then the portal changes to the peaceful skies of Montessor, and they’re through.

(He did it.

He really managed to do it—despite everything going wrong, when it came down to the end, he managed to save *everyone* this time.

If he could do that on his own, using their terrible scrapped-together plans—

Then couldn’t he do that in the future as well?)

He screams their victory into the skies, swooping in and around the boat, and Fuyumi screams right back, jumping up and down and leaping onto Miruko to give her a big kiss (at some point later, he’s going to have to tease her about that), and Miruko dips her to make it an even deeper kiss (okay, kind of gross now), and Shigaraki’s crew seems to be intent on piling him into a giant group hug, except Dabi, who is waiting for him at the stern of the boat, eyes shining as he takes his hand to help him step onto the boat.

“That was some amazing flying,” he says seriously, reaching out a hand to rub away at some of the ash on Hawks’ cheek.

“Did I manage to rattle the stars?” Hawks asks cheekily, looking up at him.

“And then some,” Dabi agrees, his other hand coming up to cup Hawks’ cheek.

Hawks nuzzles his hand. “Where’s my kiss then?”

Dabi is immediately on him, mouth hot against his, tongue tracing his lips and then inside his cheek, and even if the cybernetic tattoos on Dabi’s face scrape



against his cheek, and his hands are bruising against his hips where they've drifted—

Hawks never wants to be kissed by anyone else ever again.

They only bother to break apart when they're about to run out of air (ignoring the wolf-whistles Toga and Compress are giving them and the gagging noises Shigaraki is making), and Hawks grins at him, his hand tracing Dabi's cheek.

"That—that was good, but—you owe me so much more after everything you put me through."

"I do," Dabi agrees, his hand stroking Hawks' back. "I swear, I'll make it up to you. Where do you want to go from here?"

"...I want to see Fuyumi settled down with her orphanage and family matters sorted out," Hawks says, nodding to where Miruko is spinning a giggling Fuyumi around and around. "I don't think you'd be opposed to seeing that too, especially the part with dealing with your father."

Dabi's mouth curves into a wicked smile. "That's for sure."

"And then after—well. I have enough money now to buy out my indenture with the Navy, and after that—I'm a free man."

"A free man who still wants to fly?" Dabi asks, quirking up an eyebrow.

Hawks smirks back at him, hooking his leg with his own. "You know a crew with any openings? One that wants to do some good?"

"Given Kurogiri's return, I think our crew is changing tactics and goals, so I can think of something," Dabi says lazily, settling Hawks in deeper to his arms.

"You're both traitors and not part of my crew!" Shigaraki yells in the background.

"Now, now, Tomura, I think we can agree that they're very skilled, and that if you really want to explore your own purpose, you'll need all the help you can get..."

He's not entirely sure what he's getting into, with a pirate crew and everything, but with Dabi solidly wrapping his arms around him, and both Fuyumi and Miruko laughing and hugging and dancing, and the rest of Shigaraki's crew cheering as Mr. Compress returns some of the treasure back to its natural state and starts to shower them all with gems and gold—

He thinks they'll make it work out.



ATGG



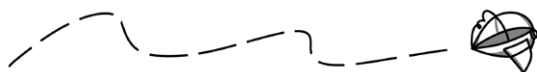
# Spar of the Future

A *Meet the Robinsons* AU by nicky

The balance between fire and ice was nearly impossible for Shouto to find for most of his life. After being raised in the forge that was his father's training room, fire was full of hate and harm and horrible nightmares. Ice, on the other hand, healed and stilled and calmed. Until the sports festival, until Midoriya, Shouto hadn't seen a single opportunity for those two worlds to collide. His father's life should have never been intertwined with his mother's anyway.

*"It's your power, Todoroki!"*

Since he'd been given the resolve to make his dual Quirk truly his own, Shouto had been putting in extra work, training whenever he could, trying to get his body used to using both sides of his Quirk at once. Sure, he used both heat and cooling to regulate his temperature, but there was nothing like using ice and flames simultaneously. The skill took a level head, a cool resolve, and a fiery passion—all at once. The more he trained, however, the more in control he became, and the more powerful he felt. Soon enough, he knew, he would no longer be afraid to meet his father in anger. His father deserved to know how he *truly* felt about his upbringing, and he would—someday.



During one of his particularly uplifting sessions, Shouto was interrupted by a shouting, "Hey! Hey, excuse me!"

Extinguishing his left side, Shouto turned to greet a boy about his age with unruly black hair and eyes blue like ice. "Can I help you?"

The boy nodded. "Yes! I was wondering if I could spar with you."

"Spar with me?" Shouto felt his left eyebrow raise. "Why?"

"Well, y'see, I have two Quirks, like you, but I don't know anyone who could teach me how to use them like you could."

Shouto narrowed his eyes, suspicious. "Do I know you? How do you know who I am?"

"Oh, uh..." He cleared his throat, pulling at his shirt collar. "No, you don't *know me*. I, um, I go to Ketsubusu, and I know you from the sports festival!"

"Okay." Shouto nodded, but his gut feeling hadn't eased. "Who exactly *are* you?"

"I'm Koji." He stuck his chest out, prodding it with his index finger. "My father

named me that because he wanted me to have luck and happiness with my two Quirks!”

“Just Koji?” Shouto raised a brow again. “No surname?”

“Oh!” Koji scrambled for a moment. “It’s Mid—uh, Miso.”

“Miso. Like the sauce?”

He sputtered before clearing his throat again. “Um, yes.”

Shouto nodded, slowly. “So is one of your Quirks food-related? That’s usually how surnames go.”

“Actually, no.” Koji laughed. “My father has a heat-related Quirk that he uses to cook sometimes, but not really food-related.”

“And your mother?”

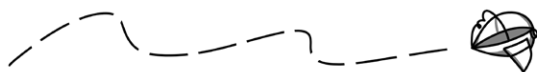
Koji shook his head. “My dad has a strength-based Quirk. Our last name must be from way in the past instead of originating from Quirk lineage.”

Shouto hummed in thought. “I see. My apologies.”

“No, it’s okay. I get that all the time. My dad is basically a mom anyways.” He paused to laugh. “So, anyways, do you trust me enough to spar with me?”

“I’m not sure,” Shouto answered, even as he felt his shoulders relax. “Let’s go for a round, and then I’ll decide.”

“Alright.”



Koji’s dual Quirk was very unique: one Quirk allowed him to open portals and move through space and time freely, while the other created vines from his fingers. Briefly, he considered a relation to Shiozaki from 1-B, but Koji was definitely a first year, so they’d have to be twins for their Quirks to be so similar... and there was no way. Further, his portal Quirk was far stronger than his vine Quirk. He was able to dance circles around Shouto, never staying in the same place for more than a moment, but he was only able to dodge. The plants his hands created were merely weeds. If Koji really concentrated, he could produce stronger attacks, but his portal use suffered as a result.

Once Shouto finally managed to pin Koji, panting from overusing his underdeveloped Quirk, he gave him a critique, “You’re focusing too much on each move you make. You need to let your Quirks both flow as a part of you. What’s the matter with your vine Quirk?”

“Uh, well.” Koji turned his head, choosing to look at the tall blades of grass rather than at Shouto. “It wasn’t very useful in the foster home, so I haven’t trained with it much until a few years ago.”



Shouto's grip relaxed then. "Foster home?"

"Yeah. My dads adopted me." He laughed, a nostalgic sound. "When I was ten, they came to the foster home looking for a foster kid to take in. They'd been doing it for a while, helping kids get on their feet before high school. When they got me, though, something just felt *right*. So I stayed." He wiped at his eyes with his free hand. "We're fostering a little girl right now, and she's the sweetest thing in the world. Dad told me that he and Father are planning on adopting her, too."

Shouto got up then, his thoughts running to his oldest brother, the one who'd planned on being a social worker, helping kids in bad situations. He'd never made it that far. If those workers made kids happy like Koji was, he was sure Touya would have done an amazing job. That is, if he'd been given the chance to leave his own childhood home.

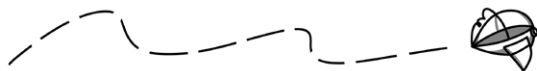
"Want to go again?"

He heard Koji gasp. "Really? Can we go to this other dojo I know first? I can teleport us there; I'll definitely have you back before curfew."

Shouto felt himself shrug despite a voice in his head warning him not to. "Sure. Why not?"

Grinning, Koji opened a portal and allowed Shouto to step through, following close behind.

"You won't regret this, I swear!"



When Koji pulled Shouto out of the portal, they were in a Japan that felt entirely incorrect. Billboards raved about Number One Hero Mirko's retirement, the former number two, Suneater, rising to the top in her place. On street corners, ads showed heroes he could have sworn he recognized but couldn't put his finger on. Nothing seemed right, and it was making Shouto's head spin.

"Where did you take me?"

"Uh, well, as close to the dojo as we can get without teleporting inside. Sensei has told me more than once to quit doing it."

"No, I mean," he reiterated, gesturing to the photo of a clearly-older Mirko, "where am I? Are we in an alternate universe or something?"

Koji paled, coughing. "Not quite. I wouldn't know about you if we were from different worlds, right?"

Shouto raised an eyebrow, but there was something that made him trust Koji. He felt warm and inviting, *like Midoriya*. Eventually, he nodded. "I don't like it, but I'll buy it."

Koji led him into the dojo then, a large studio made to look like the training

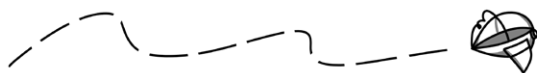
grounds of Heian Era samurai. For several long moment, Shouto stood in the doorway, taking in the atmosphere, the old lanterns hanging from the ceiling, the stream built into the middle of the building. The place was *beautiful*, and Shouto wished he'd found it sooner because it was perfect. Then, Koji stepped in front of him, filling his view with an incredibly wide smile.

"You like it? I thought you would!"

After Koji greeted his sensei, the pair set off sparring again. Now that he knew how both of Koji's Quirks worked, it was easier to instruct him on how to use them on top of each other. He taught him how to use one first, then the other. Soon enough, Koji was opening portals and shooting his vines through in an attempt at a sneak attack. The plants still weren't very strong, but he'd have an excellent ultimate move that would impress heroes and villains alike.

When Koji was really getting the hang of the move, and Shouto was putting in actual effort to dodge, Koji's phone rang. He picked it up, eyes wide. As he talked quickly, trying to assure and soothe the person on the other end, Shouto could hear an incredibly familiar, incredibly frantic voice responding. Koji was waving his free hand in the air, attempting to brush the other person off. With a deep breath, Koji hung up the phone.

He grinned sheepishly at Shouto. "My dad. I was supposed to be home by now. Want to join us for dinner?"



Before they entered his home, Koji told Shouto a few of his family's customs, including wearing hats to dinner. "My dad likes for all of us to look more put together while we eat as a family. Since we're really sweaty and don't have time to wash up, we should at least cover our hair." He fussed with Shouto's hair significantly more than his own, but Shouto decided not to dwell on it. "I'm sorry if they ask about the scar. Usually, they're polite, but..."

"It's fine; I'm used to it by now."

Koji's lips pursed at that, as if it angered him far more than appropriate for two relative strangers. "If you're sure." He opened the door, calling in a much louder voice, "I'm home! I brought a friend!"

"A *friend*?!" that nearly unmistakable voice from earlier cried back. "Koji, sweetie, I already set the table! You couldn't have warned me when I called?"

"Sorry, dad..." His voice was significantly quieter then.

"It's fine; I'm sure your father won't mind." As Koji and Shouto entered the kitchen area, a mess of fluffy green hair and a set of dishes skirted past them. Shouto felt his heart jump into his throat. Why was he suddenly *nervous*? "Would you get Riko from her room, please?"

"Yeah, sounds good." Koji grabbed Shouto's wrist and pulled him down a hall ab-

olutely covered in photos. Portraits of Koji as a child, a little girl Shouto assumed must be Riko, and Koji's fathers smiled at him as they rushed past. "Riko is in this room."

As soon as Koji let go, Shouto realized just how clammy Koji's hands had been. Was he nervous too? Was it because he rarely had guests over, or some other reason? He had no time to wonder because a tiny form crashed against his legs, nearly toppling him. Smile wide and eyes sparkling, the little girl reached her arms up at Shouto. He stooped and picked her up without even thinking about it, surprising himself.

"Uh, well, this is Riko. She's just six, so she's still getting used to her ice Quirk. She might get extra cold if she gets excited." Koji chuckled, which turned into a full laugh when Shouto automatically moved her to his left side.

She snuggled up to him, cheeks feeling like she'd been out in the snow. "She's very affectionate," Shouto commented as they made their way back down the hall.

Koji laughed again, a tad nervously this time. "She is."

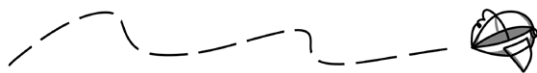
When they reached the dining room, he set Riko down and sat down himself, between Riko and Koji. Koji's father returned to the room then, all muscles and smiles and *freckles and green eyes and Midoriya*. He was *sure* the man before him was Midoriya, but he was so much older. Staring at the table, Shouto tried to will his head to stop spinning.

"Koji, Riko, Izu, I'm home!" An eerily familiar voice sounded from the front door. He looked over at Koji, whose eyes were wide with surprise, as if he hadn't expected his father to be home for dinner. "We caught the villains early. Hope I'm not too late."

"You're just in time, Shou. Koji brought a friend," Koji's dad—Midoriya? —called back.

When Koji's father walked into the room, Shouto felt his blood run cold. He'd only seen that hair, those eyes, that *scar* in photos in mirrors. For the first time, he was looking himself in the eye. He swallowed, immediately breaking eye contact.

"A friend. I see that."



For the entirety of dinner, Shouto stayed as quiet as he could, only speaking when spoken to and, even then, saying as little as he could. He was too wrapped up in his thoughts to contribute much more than that. Further, did *they* know who he was? Did Koji's fathers realize who their son had brought into their home? If Koji's parents were himself and Midoriya, did that mean...? Oh, spirits, Shouto had never had a dream quite as wild as this.

After Koji's dad, Midoriya, finished clearing the table, Shouto grabbed Koji's arm to take him outside to find out what exactly was going on, but his father, himself,

held up a hand. "Hold on, you two, before you take off. I have a question for Koji."

Shouto felt Koji go rigid. "Yes, father?"

"What," he asked, leaning forward, "were you thinking bringing my high school self into the future?"

Koji swallowed, loud enough for Shouto to hear. "Well, I've got two Quirks, and—" "So do both of your fathers!" Midoriya interrupted from the kitchen.

"I *know*. I know you do. But you're both top ten superheroes. It's a little intimidating asking you guys for help. And I didn't want to bother you with any of my silly questions."

"Koji, it's never a bother." Midoriya was in the doorway of the kitchen, drying his hands on a dishtowel. "You know we're happy to help you improve your Quirks in any way that we can."

"Yeah, but *this* Shouto," Koji gestured to Shouto, the younger one, himself, "is so much closer to the level that I am. I thought it'd be easier to learn from him."

"Well?" Koji's father asked, the hint of a smile playing on his lips. "How did it go?"

"So well!" Koji jumped up, launching into a recap of both of their sparring sessions.

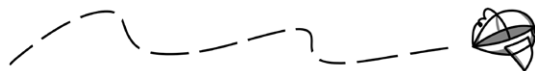
When he was done, his father nodded. "That's about how I remember it."

"Remember?" Koji echoed.

"Yes. I was there, wasn't I?" He pointed across the table at himself, the younger one.

Koji flushed. "Oh. Of course."

"Now, I *should* ground you forever for using your Quirk when you weren't supposed to, potentially meddling with the past, but I won't as long as you get Shouto here back to the moment where you grabbed him." Koji nodded, standing and pulling Shouto with him. "Well, after one thing."



Koji's father took Shouto into his office, showing him a bulletin board covered in newspaper clippings. "See anything familiar?"

In almost every single one, he sees images of himself in the top ten. "Pro Hero *Entropy*?"

"Izuku came up with it. He thought it fit better than just Shouto. Anything else?"

Many of his friends from Yuuei are in the clippings as either top tens or honourable mentions. Uravity, Ground Zero, Red Riot, and Deku show up most frequently.

"So we change from Shouto, but Midoriya stays Deku?"

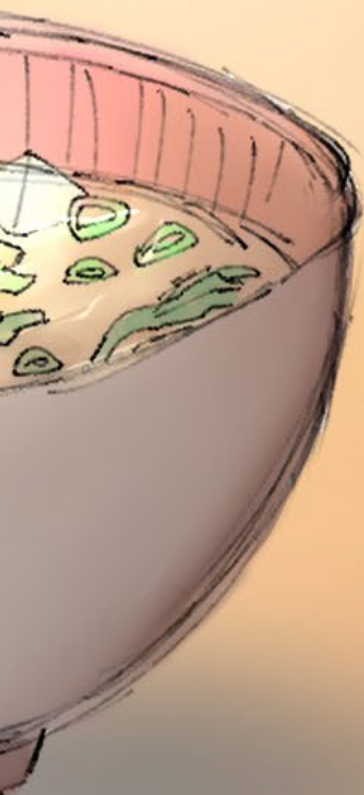
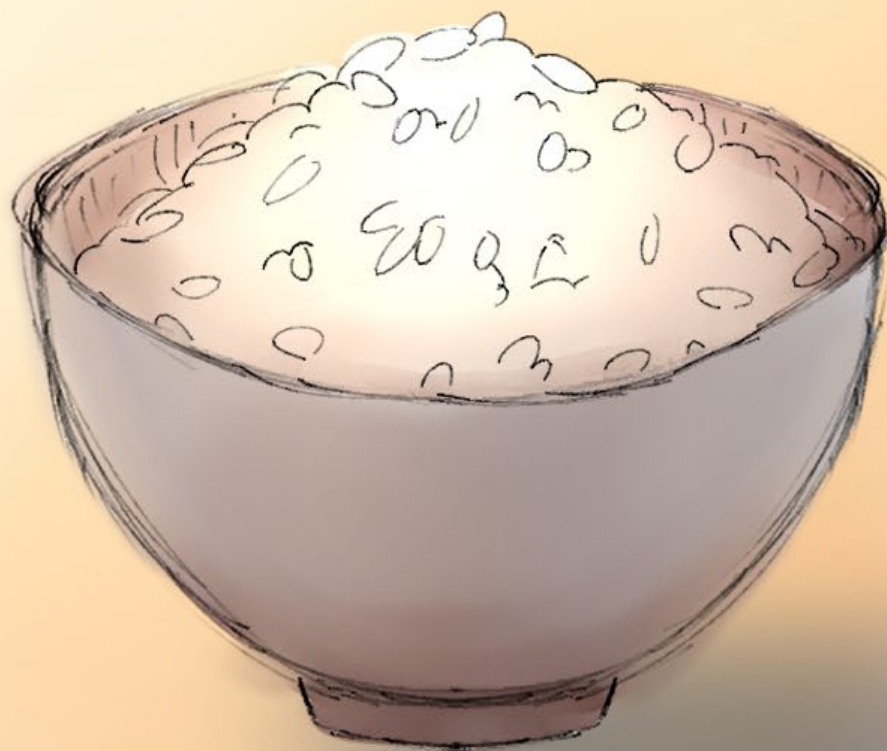
"He's tried to change it more than once, believe me, but nothing sticks as well as Deku."

He launched into a long-winded assurance that life becomes just as good as he hopes it will, that Yuuei would bring him so many wonderful things in his life. Even though Entropy would probably never beat Suneater for number one, he was happy, and Izuku was proud of him, and he had two amazing kids that were both growing into amazing people.

"Speaking of him, go ahead and tell Midoriya how you feel. That kid is gonna burst if you wait too much longer."







"MISO.  
LIKE THE SAUCE?"







# Cinderoki, the Sweaty Prince, and the Furious Fairy

A *Cinderella* AU by Esselle

Once upon a time, in a small but mighty kingdom, a little prince was born. He was very green and very round, much like his mother, the queen—and she gave him the name Izuku.

Now, the queen was lifelong friends with a very powerful fairy witch, who had helped her keep the lands safe for many years. The witch's name was Mitsuki, and it so happened that she had just magicked into the world a tiny child of her own—a little winged fairy born in an explosion of fairy dust and a rather startling burst of fire.

The fae child came to be called Katsuki. He was the spitting image of his mother; a shock of golden hair on his head, eyes red as rubies, and tiny gossamer wings that were pointed and sharp at the tips, glowing like the colors of an orange sunset. He was a rare kind of fairy, one that could grant wishes. One day a mortal would be born, and Katsuki's fate would be tied to theirs, to come to their aid whenever they were most in need of him.

"He can practice dispensing wisdom on Prince Izuku until that day happens," Mitsuki said, plopping the fairy baby down next to Izuku on the prince's soft blanket. Izuku babbled and tried to put his own foot in his mouth.

"Is that allowed?" Queen Inko asked nervously.

"He doesn't have to use magic to learn how to become a good godparent," Mitsuki reassures her. "Katsuki, look! You have a new friend!"

Katsuki shrieked, smacked the prince in the face with one pudgy hand, and singed off both Izuku's eyebrows with a small yet potent explosion. Izuku's eyes, now brow-less, widened and filled with tears.

"Katsuki, NO!" Mitsuki yelled as Inko ran to get ice. Katsuki yelled back.

The two boys were more or less stuck with each other from that moment on.

Several months later, in a township on the outskirts of the kingdom, another baby was born to a wealthy blacksmith—a boy with two different colors of hair and eyes. The first time he cried, baby Katsuki's wings glowed while he slept on, unawares.

The boy was named Shouto and he, too, had magic. Even with older siblings who'd come before him, he was the golden apple of his father's eye. But because of his strange powers he was kept hidden away and sheltered. He knew almost nothing of the kingdom, or magic, or that his wishes could be granted if only he would ask.

So all three of their stories were woven together from the start; but it would be some time before their paths collided.



Katsuki's earliest memory was of being ignored, in a most horrible and unjust fashion.

The details were hazy—if he tried his hardest, he couldn't recall where it had taken place, or if anyone else was there, besides him and Prince Izuku. All he could remember was trying his very hardest to get Izuku's attention; he'd yelled and clapped and smacked his hands upon the ground for all he was worth.

But instead of turning those enormous, bottle-green eyes and ever present smile upon him (throughout the castle, it was said that even when he cried, the infant prince still had a smile on his face), Izuku had swerved instead towards a stuffed toy some stupid noble had given him, picking it up and cooing at it. It was a fairy, with orange wings and yellow hair, clearly meant to look like the famous Fairy Witch's son, and Izuku's companion.

Katsuki had incinerated it. And then he had cried, and Izuku had cried, and so Katsuki's first memory was of being passed over for a rather shitty doll of himself, despite being right there and available for Izuku to coo over instead.

Months after this tragic event, Katsuki met his first ward. As a fairy guide, Katsuki would have many people he would have to help with his powers and wits alike. But this child was special—it was unusual for a fairy to be gifted with their first charge so young, but the other boy was also part-fae, and perhaps it was because of this and because they were so close in age that they were given to one another.

Perhaps it was merely because that was how their fates were bound.

For Katsuki, the other boy appeared to him as if he were dreaming. When he closed his eyes, he saw him—everything else dark behind his eyelids like a starry night sky, and the other boy, a baby like him, floating there before him.

Katsuki couldn't crawl yet, but his wings worked fine; so like a fat bumblebee he floated over to plop himself in front of this new and interesting object. The boy had hair of red and white, and eyes of different colors as well. Katsuki reached out to try and hit him, as he did with all new things he encountered, but his hand passed through the boy's body, leaving him unharmed, and unawares.

Again and again, Katsuki tried to get his attention; first with his hands, then with his magic, firing off bolts of explosive energy at the other boy. No matter what he did, it went unnoticed. For though he did not know it at the time, the other boy (whose name was Shouto) had not made any wishes. And until he did, Katsuki could not appear to him fully—he could only watch, and wait, to be needed.

So Katsuki's second earliest memory was also of being ignored.

He'd never forget it, and it would leave quite a lasting impression on him for years to come—he hated both these boys, and despised his position stuck so close to them.

There was nothing Katsuki wanted more than having nothing to do with either of them at all.



The years passed. Katsuki, ever a glutton for punishment, obsessively tracked the growth of the other two, eager for the day when he could be free of them at last.

Todoroki Shouto, as Katsuki eventually learned his charge's full name to be, was heir to a long and impressive line of famed blacksmiths. He was not the oldest child in his family, but he was the most special. His father had fire magic running through his blood, as had *his* father, and his father's father before that, going on down the line as far as anyone remembered, or historical records showed.

Shouto had the same fire in his veins, but he was also the only child to gain the powers of his mother—an ice fairy his father had wed, supposedly to try and sire a child with access to both kinds of magic, to heat the steel they forged as well as chill it, to make a blade that was unparalleled in strength or sharpness.

Shouto was the child he had sought; but the magic within him was too powerful. And so he was blessed, and cursed: his left hand burned ever hot, while his right was forever like frigid ice. There was no person who could bear his touch. And so he was kept shuttered away in the forge where he learned everything of his father's trade but nothing of the kingdom outside, save for the hundreds of books and fairy tales he devoured, as though he were starved for happy endings.

He was his father's pride and joy, but also a secret most covetously guarded. Most of the villagers had scarcely seen him, and whenever they did, they only glimpsed a beautiful, but utterly filthy boy working in the glow of the forge fires, covered in soot and cinders. So they started to call him Cinderoki because nobody knew his name.

Katsuki knew his name. He knew everything about Shouto. Every day, Katsuki would find him in the ink of his waking dreams and watch him. He knew Shouto's favorite food, and his favorite bedtime story growing up, and that he loved all animals, but cats most of all. He knew how terribly Shouto missed his mother, who had disappeared after the incident that left his face scarred not long after his powers had manifested, even if he did not show it. But Shouto still knew nothing of him because he had yet to make a wish.

"Come on," Katsuki would plead with him, words falling on ignorant ears. "Wish for *something*. Anything! Your life *sucks*, you oblivious, half-and-half fool, there must be something you want!"

It made Katsuki furious that Shouto never tried to escape. He just wanted to drink tea with his sister, and make his stupid swords, and most of all read his books. But Shouto had barely ever stepped foot outside his family's manor. He was painfully and pathetically unaware of all the things he was missing, and so he still had nothing to wish for.



Why Katsuki didn't just give up on him, he couldn't say.

On the other hand, Katsuki was *not* responsible for Izuku. And so it irked him to no end that the entire kingdom seemed to assume that he would wind up like Mitsuki, in lifelong service to the crown as though he had inherited the position by being his mother's son.

He refused to be lashed to Izuku's side without even having a say in the matter. Izuku wasn't great or powerful or anything impressive; he was just the kid Katsuki had grown up with, who cried way too often and had once when they were five years old asked Katsuki (who could *fly*) if he was alright after he'd taken a harmless little tumble off the castle battlements while they'd been playing.

No, Katsuki didn't think he'd very much like to be in Izuku's service, thank you very much. He had had enough of being in the prince's shadow growing up.

There was the time they were still small, and Izuku couldn't use a sword yet, but Katsuki had his magic, and he had shown Izuku under no uncertain terms that he would bow to no useless princes who couldn't defend themselves (and gotten raked over the coals by his mother and all the queen's advisors subsequently).

There was the time they were ten, and enemy goblins had attacked the queen's entourage on a journey to a neighboring kingdom. Mitsuki had been away at the time, and Katsuki had gotten a wing broken trying to stop Izuku from being beheaded. He'd still been shouted at for burning the prince in the blast and failing to stop the goblins roughing him up, as though he'd done *nothing*, as though the advisors were the voices inside Katsuki's own head insisting over and over that he'd failed. He had shoved Izuku to the ground when the prince, sobbing, tried to tend to his limp wing.

There was the time they were thirteen, and a wicked warlock and his monstrous creatures of sludge and decay had attacked the castle—and Izuku, as thin as a twig and barely able to swing a sword, had rushed at one of the monsters to claw at it with his bare hands when it had caught Katsuki and nearly suffocated him. The prince was chastised for nearly throwing away his own life, just to protect Katsuki. If it ever came down to it, Katsuki knew he was supposed to die in the prince's place, not the other way around.

There was the time they were sixteen, and dark fae descended the mountain to infiltrate the kingdom in the dead of night, after word of Katsuki's magic had begun to spread beyond the boundaries of the land. They had captured him, intent upon siphoning away his magic, and he would have been left little more than a shell of himself had Izuku not snuck out of the palace to come find him, managing to lead a search party straight to him. They all told Katsuki how he should be grateful, how he would have died, if Prince Izuku didn't defy orders again. Over and over to save Katsuki, no matter where he was, or what it meant. Katsuki felt the burden of his own helplessness even more sharply than he was sure Izuku did, heaped as it was upon shoulders that were already preparing to bear the responsibilities of an entire kingdom.

There was the time they were seventeen, and they'd fought so bitterly they had reduced the training grounds to ash, because Katsuki didn't know how to keep his power or his emotions in check, and Izuku was the only one he could trust to receive the full force of them. Afterwards, Izuku had kept them from throwing Katsuki in the dungeons for nearly murdering him. And Katsuki had reluctantly and finally developed the understanding that just because someone was born a future king did not mean they had ever wanted to crush him with the weight of the crown.

There was the time they were eighteen, and Izuku asked Katsuki to become his advisor.

"No," Katsuki had replied, "I'd rather die."

"I thought you'd say that," Izuku said.

Katsuki turned a sour expression on him. "Then why did you ask?"

"Because if I didn't, you'd always be dreading it," Izuku told him. "Now you don't have to worry about it anymore."

"Fuck off!"

Katsuki tossed a fireball at his head, and Izuku, who was by now second to none with a blade, easily sliced through it with his enchanted sword. He stabbed the point against the hard flagstones of the battlements—the very same that Katsuki had once fallen from as a child—and watched Katsuki knowingly.

"Do you want to fight me?" Izuku asked him.

"Do you think you're so far above me that you can just ask me that as a joke?" Katsuki retorted.

"It wasn't a joke, Kacchan," Izuku said. "You're always going to try and tell me what to do whether or not you're my advisor. I don't care what you are, as long as we stay together."

And Katsuki, who had long since resigned himself to the fact that he'd never be free of the prince, extinguished the crackling fire in his hands and grumbled that Izuku was such an idiot that he didn't really have a choice.

They were twenty (Izuku had just turned it) when the royal ball was announced. Soon, the castle doors would be opened to the whole kingdom, and soon, all the young and eligible gentlemen and ladies in the land would gather there, in order to try and secure the prince's hand in marriage.

All of them, it seemed, except for one.

That year, Todoroki Shouto would make his first wish.



Animals had always loved Shouto. Even as a baby they'd flocked to him, birds and dogs and kittens and mice, and he would often be found napping cradled in the center of a warm pile of soft fur or feathers.

When Shouto had turned five, his magic had blossomed; but the bud, when it bloomed, was as poisonous as it was beautiful.

He had been playing with a pet—his mother's favorite brown tabby—the same as he always did one day, and the cat had frozen solid in front of his very eyes.

His mother had found him bawling his eyes out, and had thawed the cat out there and then—and the cat was fine. But following the incident the cat wouldn't come near Shouto. And he never forgot.

After that, the way his mother looked at him some days was cold, cold, colder than even their magic. It was the way she looked at his father when he was cruel. It was the way ice withered and disappeared when exposed to fire.

The next time he had gotten too close to one of the cats, she'd tried to stop him with her magic. The ice was like needles under his skin, bit and burned him as scalding as any flame, and when his mother came back to herself and realized what she'd done to her son, it was too late. He'd bear the scar over his left eye forever.

And then everything had changed—he couldn't control his magic, his father hid him from the world, and his mother had gone away.

Fifteen years later, a messenger would arrive in town, bearing a bushel of letters.

This unusual visitor would send the whole town into uproar. In no time at all, every household was in a tizzy, from the baker to the carpenter to the butcher. The messenger, seeming quite oblivious to the commotion he left in his wake, approached the last house of the village: the blacksmith's estate at the end of the lane.

It was uncommonly large, for a smithing forge and blacksmith's home. Even the messenger, who had heard of *this* particular forge in *this* particular village, was caught unawares. But undaunted, he ventured to the great doors of the forge, and he knocked.

What he wasn't prepared for at all was to be met by two spindly, steel limbs, emerging from the opening door. Two more followed, and then another four, like a great mechanical spider of untold proportions. The messenger fell back in fright as the door was pushed open even wider for the horror to come through.

But to his shock, it wasn't the beast he was expecting that emerged; it was a boy—though he did have very strange hair and eyes. What was more, the steel appendages seemed to be attached to him—no, on closer inspection, he wore them on a harness... They all sprouted from it to extend around him, enclosing him, like they meant to entrap him—but he controlled them as if they were his own arms, extending them toward the messenger.

"Hello," said the boy, "is that for the blacksmith?"

He was referring to the letter, which the messenger still held in hand, though he had quite forgotten to get on with his announcement, so awestruck was he at the sight of the boy. Now he snapped back to attention.

"Greetings! I am here to deliver a letter from the palace!"

The boy's eyes widened the tiniest fraction. "The royal palace?"

"Indeed, young sir!" said the messenger. "From the crown prince himself!"

He held out the letter he'd brought, and the boy gingerly took it with one long metal arm, grasping it with a clasp that he seemed to maneuver with his real hands, as deftly as if he'd been doing it his entire life. His grip was exceedingly gentle despite the hard-edged steel. The messenger then noticed a pallor of frost lay over the base of the metal right arm, while the left gave off shimmering heat vapors.

"Thank you," the boy said, as if nothing about him were at all out of the ordinary.

"A fine day to you, sir," the messenger said. He swept off his hat in a bow, and then was off, not wanting to linger and be caught staring.

The boy, he thought, looked about the age to be able to accept the invitation. Hopefully, he would not bring his giant contraption to the ball. It would be very hard to maneuver about the dance floor like that.



Shouto stared down at the letter. Even as skilled as he was using his element-proofed mechanics, he was still almost afraid to hold it, afraid it would crumble in the grasp of his steel. But it was far safer than touching it with his bare hands, and his control did not waver. The letter sat carefully pinched in one metal claw, unharmed—even so, he adjusted his grip even further with a couple careful flicks of his fingers, minutely twisting one of the metal dials on the arm. The dial sizzled under his touch, but he wasn't burned.

Then he slowly carried the letter to the sitting room, where he knew the rest of his family would be waiting.

He couldn't help but be lost in his thoughts as he walked. He was thinking not so much of the letter, yet, because he didn't know what it said; his thoughts were more on the messenger, and the look on the man's face when Shouto had opened the door.

Not being able to touch anything with his bare hands since the age of five had been, to put it mildly, a real bitch of a situation. As a child, it had been nearly impossible; only the lingering memory of the frozen cat had managed to keep him somewhat in check—but it was out of fear, not any real understanding of his powers.

But he'd grown, and with age had evolved his skill as a blacksmith, and a tinkerer, and an engineer.

He had fashioned himself these extra limbs in order to be able to be more self-sufficient, adding to them and improving them over the years until they were practically an extension of his own body, so intuitive were they in their use to him. Little birds and squirrels would perch there on the cage of his limbs, arcing over his back like scorpion tails from the harness where they were attached. He had experimented with special extensions he could swap in and out, for pouring tea, or reading books, or braiding his sister's hair—he had gotten so good it never even tangled.

It was a stunningly complex feat of smithing and mechanics, and even he had to admit that without his magic, he might not have had the skill to create them. So the cage was made *by* his magic, to protect everyone else *from* his magic. And if that wasn't a metaphor for his entire damn life then he didn't know what was.

But he knew what it made him look like to other people: a monster, unnatural, half a boy, and half something else (the other half was actually fae, but that would probably go overlooked by most due to his great big robot spider legs). Locked away as he was, he could sometimes forget about it—but seeing the look on the messenger's face that morning had reminded him.

His father kept him locked away because of his magic, his potential, and his importance as an heir. Shouto kept himself locked away because he was a freak, and he knew it.

He shook himself from his thoughts as he reached the door to the sitting room, tapping on it with one of the cage limbs.

"Come in."

Shouto opened the door and poked his head inside. "Good morning."

His father, sister, and brother were all there, taking their tea while the morning light was in the perfect position to light the room airy and glowing. Fuyumi waved at him.

"You're awake already?" she said. "This is early for you!"

"It's not *that* early," Shouto said, even though she was right. He liked to stay up late reading, and stay in bed late sleeping.

"Was that you who got the door?" Natsuo asked. Shouto nodded.

His father sighed deeply. "We've spoken about this."

"I was right next to it."

"I don't want people trying to poke their noses into our business—"

"Nobody wants to poke their nose into our business," Shouto said. "We're blacksmiths. Our business is obvious. It says so on a sign."



"You know what I mean," Enji said.

What he meant was that he didn't want any other prospective blacksmiths catching wind of Shouto's powers and going on a mad quest to curry favor with the northern fae people in order to wed one of their ice fairies and produce a cursed heir with out of control magic that would make him the best blacksmith of their age. The thought was, frankly, so stupid that Shouto didn't bother dignifying it with a response.

"What did the letter say, Shouto?" Fuyumi asked quickly.

"I haven't opened it," Shouto said. "But it's from the castle."

His siblings exchanged a surprised glance. "Let's see it, then," Natsuo said. Shouto deposited the letter in his hand, and he opened it.

"Dear esteemed sirs and ladies, the royal palace hopes this letter finds you well," he read. "On behalf of her majesty, Queen Inko, and her son, Crown Prince Izuku, this letter is addressed to all unwed citizens of the kingdom of marriageable age. You are cordially invited to attend a royal ball at the castle, as is tradition, for the prince to meet with eligible suitors."

"A ball?!" Fuyumi's hands had flown to her mouth.

"At the *castle*!" Natsuo said, eyes shining, tossing the letter aside. Shouto picked it up from where it had fallen on the couch. "Think of all the people there'll be to dance with... they're bound to be more interesting than anyone in this village!" He snapped his fingers. "Maybe we can find you a wife, Fuyumi."

Fuyumi covered her face. "Natsuo, please."

"Don't joke, Natsuo," their father said sternly. Natsuo rolled his eyes. "This isn't an opportunity we should allow to pass by lightly. The letter said this is a chance for the *prince* to go courting. I have heard he's a bit soft, but, well... the two of you would make fine enough consorts to the crown, and our family already has influence with the queen."

"Yeah, because we make their soldiers' swords," Natsuo said dryly. "The prince is going to marry some princess, or duke, or other noble."

Unnoticed by the rest of his family, Shouto read the letter over again. It was indeed as Natsuo had read—a ball, at the castle, and a chance to fall in love with a prince. It was like something out of one of his books.

"This ball is just a formality," Natsuo was saying.

"Even so, you are no mere commoner," Enji said.

"Who said we *want* to marry the prince, anyway?"

"I am not sending you to the castle so you can drink some fancy wine and chatter at empty-headed fools all night!"

"You don't have to *send* me, I'm going to go myself—"

"We should go," Shouto said quietly.

His father and brother both said as one, "Right, Shouto," before turning to look at each other furiously.

"As the Todoroki family, it is our duty to have a presence there," Enji said. "Not as drunkards or dandies, but as a respected family of this kingdom."

"They invited *everyone*, they're not expecting him to talk to *every single person that shows up*," Natsuo insisted. "We can go 'have a presence' there all we want without looking like we're going to shoulder everyone else out of the way to get to the throne."

"What princess deserves it more than this family?" Enji said. "When I have armed the defenders of this kingdom—"

"You are so *dramatic*—"

"Does this have to be a fight," Fuyumi sighed.

"Yes," they both said emphatically without looking at her.

"I meant," Shouto said, "that I want to go, too."

"See?" Enji said. "Even Shouto—*what* did you just say?"

The argument ground to a halt. Fuyumi and Natsuo turned to him, eyes wide. Shouto blinked back at them.

"I said I want to go," he said. Then he clarified: "To the ball."

"To the..." Fuyumi shook her head. "But, Shouto..."

"I'll use the cage," Shouto told her. "It will be fine."

They all looked very much like they doubted it would be fine.

"Shouto... how would you dance?" Natsuo asked.

Shouto snorted. "I won't. I don't even know how."

"But then why—"

"I just want to see!" Shouto burst out, unable to hold back. The cage limbs rattled uncertainly. "I just want to see what it's like, somewhere that isn't here. It will be far from the village, and like Natsuo said, *everyone* is going, so there will be hundreds and hundreds of people there. *Thousands*, even. Nobody will even notice me."

"Um..." Fuyumi said, staring at the cage.

Shouto wilted. "Well, at least, nobody will know who I am."

"Oh, Shouto..." Fuyumi said softly.

Then his father said, "No."

Shouto whipped around to face him. "But—"

"No," Enji said. "I forbid it."

Natsuo glared. "Oh, come on—"

"It's too dangerous!" said their father, voice rising in volume and temper. "And beyond that, you are *very* noticeable, Shouto. What if the prince becomes curious?"

"Then let him," Shouto said.

"Absolutely not," Enji told him. "I won't have you taking an interest in some flip-pant, foolish boy and deserting the family business."

"Oh, but that's fine for me and Fuyumi," Natsuo said.

"You and your sister are not the ones who will keep these forge fires burning after I am gone," Enji growled. "Besides which, need I remind all of you, that neither of you would *burn the crown prince's bloody hands off*."

He glared at them all, breathing hard through his nose, and they stared back. Fuyumi was wringing her hands. Natsuo looked furious.

Shouto, meanwhile, was unsurprised.

"Shouto will not go to this ball," Enji said with finality. "The two of you will. That is the end of the matter."

Shouto left the sitting room, unable to bear his siblings' sorry looks, or his father's feigned indifference. It was only after he'd made it back to his room and shut the door behind him that he realized he'd nearly shredded the letter with the cage.

He knew why it was a bad idea to go. He didn't need his father's excuses for that. But for a brief moment, he'd thought of his fairy tales, and how far away the castle was from the village. How it would just be him and his brother and sister, and how they could talk about it for years afterwards. That one glimpse of freedom had gripped him until he was saying things even he himself didn't believe, wanting things he'd never before wanted.

He tried to ignore the way his eyes felt hot and irritated.

"I..." he whispered, feeling stupid and childish and desperate. "I wish I could have gone."

In the next second, he found himself stumbling away from a small yet potent explosion of fire, smoke, and extensive swearing. He backed away from it until he was pressed against the wall of his room, watching in alarm as someone—a *person*, a young man about his age with fiery, sunset wings, stepped out of the grey, dissipating cloud.

This man (a fae, he had to be) looked right at him with eyes like glowing coals and an ugly expression on his otherwise beautiful face.

"It's about fucking time, you sloth-ass bitch!" he snarled.



The fairy's name was Katsuki, and he could grant wishes.

"Like... *any* wish?" Shouto asked. He was sitting on his bed now, staring up at Katsuki. He really *was* a real fairy; not that Shouto didn't think they were real, since he was half-fae himself, but he'd never met another one besides his mother before.

"Within *reason*," Katsuki answered. He kept rubbing his temples as though he had a headache. "I'm not going to grant any wishes that are actively dangerous or evil, or anything."

"But where do you draw the line?" Shouto asked.

"Wherever I fucking *want* to," Katsuki snapped. "Listen—I didn't wait twenty years to play twenty questions with you, you got a wish or not?"

"Why did you wait twenty years?" Shouto asked.

Katsuki inhaled deeply through his nose. It looked like it took a great deal of patience.

"Because," he said, "I couldn't appear to you before you made a wish. So I watched you, hoping you would wish for something, *anything*, to make your sad little life better, so that I could grant it and finally stop worrying about you once and for all. But you never did. You just sat there in your dark little room with your boring little books and your pathetic little face all wistful and annoying, never once actually doing anything about it! But now you finally have, so let's get this over with."

Shouto waited a moment to see if the tirade was over. When the fairy said nothing more, only glared with his wings buzzing agitatedly every now and again, Shouto asked,

"You were watching me all this time?"

Katsuki threw his hands in the air. "Yes! Now tell me what you want to wish for!"

"I wish I could go to the royal ball for Prince Izuku," Shouto finally told him.

Katsuki screwed up his face. "That's *it*?" Shouto nodded. "Why?"

"It seems fun."

"It's not going to be fun." Katsuki scowled. "It's going to be terrible. You have to have a better wish."

"I want that one," Shouto said.

"I can do literally *anything*," Katsuki said, and then seeing Shouto open his mouth again hastily added, "*within reason*, and you want to ask me to go to a dance? That you could just go to on your own anyway?"

"I can't go on my own like a normal person," Shouto said. "I've never even been off our estate. I don't know how to get to the castle, plus you may have noticed—" He pointed at the cage. "I'm not exactly hard to spot. My father will make sure I don't try to sneak in and this is sort of a dead giveaway."

"Alright, fair enough, you are absolutely horrifying," Katsuki conceded. "I still don't know why you'd want to go to a ball. There are more... *fun* things to wish for than being stuck with a bunch of snooty, stuffy assholes dancing and drinking."

Shouto nodded. He didn't disagree with that, however... "I want to meet the prince."

Katsuki snorted. "You do. And are you hoping he'll marry..." He gestured vaguely at Shouto.

"No," Shouto said. That was a ridiculous notion. "But I want to know what he's like. If I can meet him, then maybe I'll know the difference."

"Between what?"

"Between real life, and the stories I grew up on," Shouto tells him. "I can finally stop wondering what it's like."

Katsuki crossed his arms and stared at Shouto for a long time. Finally he said, "He's nothing special."

But his voice was odd when he said it. Too familiar—like he was talking about an old storybook he'd read over and over and over, until he'd worn off the images on the pages, until the ink had sunk right into his fingers and the tales lived beneath his skin instead.

"How do you know?" Shouto asked.

"Because I know him better than anyone else in the world," Katsuki told him. Shouto's eyes went wide, wide, and the fairy made a noise of disgust. "Ugh, alright. I'll help you get to the stupid ball."

Shouto clasped his hands in his lap to keep from throwing them in the air. "You will?"

"Don't get too excited," Katsuki said. "We've only got a month, and a lot of work to do."

"What are we going to work on?"

Katsuki cast him a long, unimpressed look up and down. "Everything."





It soon became evident that he wasn't joking (Shouto doubted whether Katsuki had ever joked in his life. His siblings said Shouto was serious, but Katsuki made him look like a court jester in comparison).

Everything about Shouto was, apparently, wrong. They had begun right away in assessing his flaws, which were numerous. To name a few: he was a hopeless dancer, he had no idea about etiquette, he didn't even know the names or titles of a single member of the nobility. According to Katsuki, he was an inelegant fool.

The blacksmith's estate had sprawling, disused gardens that Shouto had rarely ever spent time in growing up, afraid of accidentally setting the whole thing alight. They had been his mother's gardens, and after she had disappeared nobody had bothered to care for them. Rather than dying off, they had instead grown rampant and wild. They were a perfect place to hide, with just the right amount of space for Katsuki to prepare Shouto for the ball ahead. More importantly, Enji never set foot in them, so the likelihood of Shouto being found there was low (Katsuki could disappear at a moment's notice, so he wasn't much at risk, Shouto had pointed out). So it was there that they began a rigorous training camp, daily, whenever Shouto had time to spare from the forge. It was tiring work.

But for the first time in his life, away from the heat and black iron of the forge, in the open air among the hundred differently colored flowers, Shouto didn't feel so shut away from the world. Katsuki was bringing it to him. He just wasn't exactly nice about it.

"You'd be more likely to fool them into believing you're a saucepan than make them think you're a noble fit to meet the prince," Katsuki said, after the fourth time Shouto mixed up the Earl of Storkshire with the Duke of Yorkshire in less than an hour. He was meant to be matching their portraits to their title using a set of cards Katsuki had conjured up.

"I feel like I nearly had it that time," Shouto said.

"You didn't," Katsuki said, looking pained. Somehow, Shouto found Katsuki's expressions of great distress almost worth how terrible he was at these insufferable *Guess the Noble* tests.

It was the same with the table manners lectures. Shouto had thought that he mostly understood these, given his father's own tendency toward particularness. But even Enji couldn't match the maddening amount of cutlery varieties Katsuki attempted to drill into him day after day.

"Who is it *hurting* if I use the salad fork instead of the fish one?" Shouto mumbled into the tablecloth, where he had planted himself face down in despair.

"You wanted this," Katsuki said, unsympathetic.

"I don't recall wishing I could impress people with my knowledge of dinner utensils."

Katsuki smacked a hand on the table right next to his nose. It took all Shouto's

willpower not to jump in surprise and give the fairy the satisfaction. "If you get invited to dine at the queen's table, you'll need to know all of these like the back of your hand!"

"Putting aside the fact that I *won't* be—do they really care about all of this?"

"The royal family? No." Katsuki leaned a hip against the table. He had a very narrow waist, Shouto kept noticing. Maybe it made him more aerodynamic? "But their advisors will and unfortunately, they like to act nosy."

"Will the prince care much about what his advisors think?"

"Why are you asking *me*, I'm not the prince."

"You always seem to know what he'll think, though," Shouto said.

Katsuki had a lot of stories about the prince, most of them told with the aim of disabusing Shouto of his more outlandish notions about Izuku. Shouto had yet to tell him his attempts were backfiring spectacularly—in fact, he now felt more intrigued by the prince than ever before. Izuku sounded noble and brave and just, but in equal parts foolish and silly and awkward. From Katsuki's stories, he sounded *human*, and that made him more intriguing to Shouto than any gilded notion of him.

Shouto had also learned that the two of them had grown up together, and he found himself vastly preoccupied with the thought of what that must have been like. After all, growing up as the best friend ("We aren't best friends," Katsuki insisted every time he said this) of the prince must have been interesting in and of itself. But on the flip side, so must have been growing up with Katsuki, who was an utter, insufferable monster.

Shouto had always thought of himself as a bit monstrous, but Katsuki was a different kind, and Shouto liked that there were two of them. Where Shouto looked the part, with his deadly touch, and his hulking metal claws, and his scarred face, Katsuki was all unattainable beauty. Golden hair, angelic visage, gossamer wings—and his personality was complete shit, ruining the whole effect.

Shouto thought Katsuki was perfect. He thought maybe the one thing they had in common was that, like the dragons and trolls and giants in stories, everyone was always afraid of the two of them. But as fellow monsters, they had nothing to fear from each other.

"I'm pretty sure the prince is going to think you're an idiot regardless of whether or not you know which fork to use for fish," Katsuki said.

"Great, we can stop doing this then," Shouto said, very optimistically.

"Nice try, asshole. Recite them again."

As exasperated as he was with Shouto, Katsuki kept at it—he was single-minded and determined about Shouto's improvement, even if his way of encouragement was to whack Shouto over the head with a book or twig or whatever else was at hand when he got things wrong.

Another thing that was excitingly unfamiliar was that Katsuki wasn't at all perturbed by the cage. Maybe it was because he'd been watching Shouto all their lives (and what an odd and lingering thought *that* was), but he barely seemed to notice it. When Shouto asked him how they'd tackle that particular little problem, Katsuki had merely told him not to worry about it.

There was no way to ignore it, however, when they went to practice the dancing.

"This is impossible!" Katsuki hollered, after the third time nearly getting his eye poked out that day by one of the cage's arms. "I can't teach you anything like this!"

They were standing several feet apart, miming the movements with air partners, as they had been for the past two weeks. Yet Shouto still showed no improvement, and Katsuki was still in danger of tragically losing his depth perception.

"I really don't think it's going to matter too much," Shouto said. "No one's going to dance with me anyway when I'm wearing this."

"I already told you to quit worrying about that," Katsuki said. "Right, okay—take the damn thing off."

Shouto froze, sure he had heard wrong. "What?"

"Take it *off*," Katsuki demanded. "We're never going to get anything done otherwise."

"Katsuki—"

"Now, Todoroki, or I'm gonna explode it off of you—"

"Okay!" Shouto said quickly, because Katsuki would follow through on that threat. "Hold on..."

The harness of the cage wasn't exactly simple to remove. Katsuki tapped his foot as Shouto undid all the metal clasps and buckles, the leather ties, that secured it in place. The harness split in two like the huge carapace of an enormous insect, spitting him out of its insides, arms adjusting to balance it upright as he'd built it to do once it stood alone. It looked as though it had a life of its own, and divorced from it, Shouto could see just how awful it must appear to others. It was why he rarely ever took it off.

Katsuki barely glanced at it. He stepped closer to Shouto, and Shouto watched warily. He felt naked, useless, hands hanging limp at his sides, careful not to touch his clothing. He couldn't do anything.

"Right," Katsuki said, and then he grabbed Shouto's left hand.

"*What are you—*" Shouto nearly shouted, trying to yank away, but the fairy didn't let him.

"Calm down!" Katsuki shouted back. "Look!"

Wrenching his eyes towards their clasped hands, Shouto was already prepared for the worst, prepared to see Katsuki's skin bubbling, melting, *burning*—but it wasn't. Katsuki was holding his hand, and Katsuki's fingers were... fine.

He looked back at Katsuki in disbelief as the fairy started to laugh at him.

"Your *face*," Katsuki wheezed. "*Finally* I got you to show an actual emotion!"

"It's not hurting you?" Shouto asked, sounding as dumb as Katsuki continually said he was. He was too shocked to even be upset.

"I'm a *fire fairy*," Katsuki said, enunciating the words like he was speaking to a small child, one who wasn't particularly bright.

"You're a fire fairy," Shouto repeated. He looked down at their hands again, then back up at Katsuki. Katsuki was touching him, and he wasn't hurt.

He didn't realize how intense his stare must have been until the shit-eating grin faded from Katsuki's face and the fairy looked away, face getting redder.

"Gross," he said. "Don't look at me like that."

"How am I looking at you?" Shouto asked.

"Like it's a good thing I came along to save your sorry ass from itself," Katsuki said. "You'd be a mess if not for me."

Shouto pinched Katsuki's ear with his frozen right hand, and Katsuki, who was *not* an ice fairy, yelped so loudly that Shouto had to force him to hide for fear someone might have heard them, which proved much harder to do while Katsuki was trying to explode his face off.

From there, the dancing lessons proceeded about as well as could be expected; which was to say, still catastrophically. Shouto could not stop himself from turning the wrong direction, or stepping on Katsuki's feet, or mixing up the movements of each dance. Sometimes he got so flustered he forgot himself, resting his hand on Katsuki's shoulder—after a mere few seconds, the chill would get so intense the fairy nearly got frostbite. Eventually, they settled for placing a thick towel folded multiple times on Katsuki's shoulder and continued on practicing with that.

It wasn't just that Shouto had no idea what he was doing (that was a large part of it, but not all). It was also impossible to focus. The instant Katsuki took Shouto's hand in his, and planted his other on Shouto's waist in a grip that was just shy of bruising, Shouto lost the ability to think about anything but how warm his touch was even through layers of clothing, how close they had to stand together, how true the red of Katsuki's eyes was when he was only inches away.

It was immensely distracting. He stepped on Katsuki's foot again.

Katsuki swore, but didn't rebuke Shouto further, which only went to show how resigned he was at that point. Instead, he turned those fierce scarlet eyes to Shouto's face and said, "Can you smile, for the love of—*smile*, what are you *doing*?"

"I'm smiling," Shouto said. This was a blatant lie.

"That isn't a smile, that's an expression of deep regret." They made a slow circle, and while Shouto managed to pull off the turn properly without making any mistakes or injuring any feet, it meant he wasn't thinking much about his facial expressions. "Do you want the prince to think you're constipated?"

Shouto leveled him with an exasperated stare. "I don't smile often."

"Yeah, no shit," Katsuki said.

"You're already teaching me everything else," Shouto said. "Maybe we should work that into the curriculum."

"No," Katsuki said flatly.

"Why?"

"Because I don't know how either."

Shouto sighed, pulling away from him to sit on one of the stone garden benches and catch his breath. To his surprise, Katsuki came and sat with him after a moment.

"I already know I'm a disgrace at this," Shouto told him. "I've never danced before."

"That's not true," Katsuki said.

It took Shouto a second to realize what he'd said. Once he did, he glanced at Katsuki in confusion. "Yes, it is."

Katsuki shook his head. "You've danced before."

Shouto snorted. "With who?"

"Your mother."

"My—"

The memories hit him in an overpowering wave. He fell silent, clutching the edges of the bench as they filled every nook and cranny of his mind, bursting into being.

Except... were they memories? It was almost like he was watching himself in a dream: small, not even five years old, held in his mother's arms as she waltzed around the room with him. They were both laughing. She was humming something, some tune nearly forgotten, one he only remembered now when he closed his eyes. But he knew it, he *knew* it.

"She used to dance with me," he breathed, and his voice may have trembled, but he didn't care to hide it. "All the time... I'd ask her to dance like they did in the stories. It was my favorite... my favorite part."

"Yeah," Katsuki said, and then swiftly shattered the fragility of the moment. "So



imagine my surprise that you suck at it.”

“How am I only just now remembering this?” Shouto asked.

“Because I never forgot it,” Katsuki said. “I remember watching you.”

“Are these...”

Katsuki tapped his temple. “All from up here.”

Those were Katsuki’s memories of Shouto. They were fragmented, but the short flashes Katsuki had shared were bright and clear as a spring morning. Shouto didn’t even know how he’d remembered—they were nearly the same age, so Katsuki would’ve been as small as he was. Maybe fairies just had better memories. But there was a warmth to the visions, and Shouto couldn’t tell if that was how he himself recalled it, or if it came from Katsuki.

No wonder he wanted to go to this ball so much, no wonder Katsuki was pouring every ounce of effort into training him. This was all Shouto had ever wanted. He’d just buried it deep, deep down, believing that chance to be gone for good.

“Thank you,” he whispered.

“Don’t thank me yet, you’ve still got about seven left feet I can’t seem to do anything about,” Katsuki said, waving him off. “Anyway, it’s—not a big deal. The dancing isn’t actually as important, the prince is terrible at it, too.”

“It is important,” Shouto said. He stood up, and extended his left hand toward Katsuki. “Thank you for reminding me. I’ll work harder.”

Dubiously, Katsuki took his hand, letting Shouto pull him up. “I guess if I can just get you to not stomp his feet off at the ankles, we can consider that a win.”

“Even if I don’t smile?”

“Eh, he’s had to deal with me for years. You’re a real gem in comparison.”

Shouto wasn’t so sure about that. For all Katsuki said about the prince putting up with him, from all his stories it sounded much more like the prince couldn’t do without his feisty winged companion, constantly by his side no matter how Katsuki tried to paint it as a chore. Katsuki would probably rather bite off his own tongue than admit it, but the two of them had something special—the kind of bond Shouto could only dream of having, like the friends who watched each other’s backs in any good adventure tale.

He couldn’t be jealous. They’d known each other their entire lives, and he’d always been alone.

And yet, here he was—falling for a fairy who couldn’t stand him, and a prince he’d never met, through stories like the ones he’d grown up on.



They practiced, and practiced, and practiced—until Shouto could recite the names and titles of every noble in his sleep, knew the proper etiquette for virtually any situation, had all the dances memorized (even if he was still a little stiff in his movements).

The day of the ball approached with a swiftness that startled him. His siblings prepared to attend while simultaneously trying to get their father to relent and allow Shouto to join them, but as Shouto knew he would, he refused. So when the evening finally arrived, Shouto stood by the gates to the estate, seeing them off while his own bubbling, secret excitement coursed through his veins.

"We'll bring you back so many sweets," Fuyumi said tearfully.

"Don't cry, Fu," Shouto said. "You look beautiful, by the way."

Her mouth trembled. "Thanks."

"We could still get you out there," Natsuo said in a low voice, casting a baleful glare at the carriage waiting for them. "Could have a couple of my friends swing by in an hour or so, once we're far enough away."

Shouto shook his head violently. The thought of being stuck in a horse-drawn wagon with some of Natsuo's friends, all staring at him like he was some sort of festival oddity, made him want to set something on fire. Fortunately, he'd made his own arrangements.

"Please don't do that." When Natsuo sighed heavily, he added, "I'm *fine*. Really. You two just go and... have fun, okay? That's all I want."

Fuyumi reached out to comb her fingers through his hair like he was a child again. "This is how you always are. You never try to..."

*To want anything for myself*, Shouto thought. He could practically hear Katsuki's huff of agreement.

"Bring back extra cream puffs, though," he said. Mollified by this, she nodded, and they went to join their father.

Shouto waited until the carriage had disappeared down the road, before turning and heading for the gardens. He'd seen them more the past month than he had the last fifteen years of his life, but he and Katsuki usually ended their sessions before the sun had set. At this time of day, things felt different all over again—the twilight paths through the hedges and vine-strewn trellises, the colors of the flowers changing in the sunset glow, and the expectation of something *new* about to happen.

He arrived at their usual spot by the rose bushes, but nobody else was there. Katsuki had told him to wait, and Shouto presumed he was busy preparing for the festivities at the palace, so he sat down on a bench and tried to be patient. His nerves thrummed below his skin. It was hard to believe tonight was the night.

He had been sitting by himself for nearly half an hour before a soft *boom* behind

him signaled Katsuki's normal explosive arrival. Shouto turned to face him, and promptly forgot how to speak.

Katsuki's usual garb, often casual and occasionally singed, had been swapped out that night for ink black formal wear—fae-spun silk from the look and cut of it, a darker shade than human dye could ever hope to achieve, with fiery stitching embroidered over the sleeves. It was perfectly fitted to Katsuki's lithe form. If Shouto had an issue not dwelling on Katsuki's narrow waist before, he might as well give up now.

"Wow," Shouto said.

"Yeah, yeah," Katsuki grumbled. "I look like an asshole."

Shouto shook his head. "No, you don't. You look fantastic."

Katsuki shot him some kind of sharp, shocked look that might have been disgust, or possibly rage. Shouto couldn't tell; he had just learned it was usually one of the two when Katsuki's face went red like that. Shouto schooled his face into his blankest expression.

But Katsuki just scoffed, the irritation falling away. "Don't waste your flattery on me tonight." Shouto wanted to say it wasn't flattery, but decided not to push his luck. "Ready to do this?"

"You still haven't told me what 'this' is," Shouto said, though he was already undoing the harness of the cage to step out of it.

Katsuki sneered at him. "I know you've read enough books to know what *building suspense* is," he said. When Shouto cast him a less than impressed look, he rolled his eyes. "Ungrateful, that's what you are. Fine—thank me when we're done."

The fairy clapped his hands together once, the sound resounding throughout the garden, before aiming both his palms in Shouto's direction. As this gesture usually preceded an explosion of some sort, Shouto didn't think he was wrong to feel alarmed.

"Katsuki, *wait*—"

**BOOM!**

The blast rocked the garden. Shouto staggered back, expecting to feel flames engulfing him—but when the smoke started to clear and he opened his eyes, he saw nothing had been destroyed.

Instead, he had changed. Or rather, his clothes had.

Gone were his old, worn down, soot-covered blacksmith's vestments. In their place, he found himself wearing a powder blue suit, perfectly fitted to him. The material was thick and luxurious, but still soft to the touch; the shirt was spotlessly, impossibly white, the polar opposite of the clothes Katsuki wore. It might have been cleaner than anything he'd ever worn in his life. Two more tiny explosions, and he was wearing gleaming white leather boots. Katsuki flicked a hand in his di-

rection and one final blast blew his hair back from his face, but instead of settling back down it remained coiffed, swept back and off his forehead.

Katsuki snapped his fingers, and a looking glass appeared out of thin air. Shouto stared into it, and didn't recognize himself. For one thing, his hair was not only styled, but Katsuki had turned it entirely dark, an extra layer to his disguise. For another, he looked as elegant and dashing as any prince, any storybook hero.

"Holy shit," he said.

"You're welcome," Katsuki replied. He crossed his arms and looked Shouto up and down.

"Careful," Shouto said, "you almost look impressed with me."

"Well," Katsuki said, "you look good."

He sounded pleased. Shouto was so taken aback that for a blissful moment, he forgot entirely about the cage; but then he glimpsed it in the mirror, the maw of the harness gaping open, waiting to swallow him again. His reflection's face fell.

"It'll ruin it," he said. The cage pinched and grabbed and stained any clothes he put on—it would rend straight through fabric this fine.

"Come here," Katsuki ordered.

"Katsuki..."

The fairy pointed imperiously at the ground in front of him, so Shouto reluctantly went to stand before him.

"Close your eyes," Katsuki said.

"Why?"

"Because I said so." When Shouto continued to watch him suspiciously, he snapped, "Did I, or did I not, just give you a sick-ass suit?"

Shouto dutifully closed his eyes.

"Good. Now, hold out both hands."

"Can't you just—"

"Hold 'em out, Half-and-Half!" Shouto stuck both hands out and Katsuki harumphed. "Endless bitchin', after all I've done..."

Something soft dropped into both his hands, but he kept his eyes shut until Katsuki told him, "Now you can look."

He opened his eyes. In either hand was a single rose: blood red in his left, snow white in his right. They were freshly plucked—they must have come from the very garden they were standing in.

Shouto didn't understand. "How are these supposed to..."

Katsuki raised an eyebrow. "You don't see?"

Shouto looked down at the roses and then realized—the red rose wasn't burning. The white rose wasn't freezing.

"How?" he gasped.

Katsuki reached out, pressing his open palms against the backs of Shouto's hands. They were hardly strangers to touching, now, but the proximity still made Shouto feel giddy.

"Watch this," Katsuki said, all cocky self-assurance, and before Shouto could ask what he was supposed to be watching, he saw.

It started at his fingertips: a shimmering, sparkling light, and he couldn't tell if it was fire burning or water gleaming in the moonlight or something in between. Then it moved down his fingers and the only thing he knew for certain was it was magic—and it was old, and powerful.

"What is this?" he whispered.

"*Shh*," Katsuki said, and when Shouto glanced at his face he saw Katsuki had his brows furrowed in concentration, and the slightest beading of sweat had appeared on his forehead. He had never shown any signs of effort when using his magic before.

Shouto looked back at his hands. It was almost as though the lights dancing there were *weaving* themselves down his hands, and then he realized they *were*. As they traveled down, over his palms now, inching toward his wrists, gloves of pure white appeared. Shouto didn't know what material they were made of; they had a slight sheen, but were impossibly soft, and fit him—well, like a glove. Not tight enough to be uncomfortable, but there was no slack to them either. It was as though he wore a second skin, thin enough that he could still feel the roses in each palm; then as the gloves finished knitting themselves just past his wrists, suddenly each blossom shimmered, too, and were gone as though they'd never been. The only trace of them were two intricately stitched roses, one in each palm. There they faintly glowed, one red, one white.

He raised his hands in front of his face, turned them over in wonder. "Is this..."

"Try and burn something through *those*," Katsuki said, clearly pleased. "Or freeze, whatever."

Shouto held his hands up to his face—with gloves this thin, he should be able to feel heat, or cold—but there was nothing.

Hesitant, he touched a finger to a vine winding around a tall pillar. It didn't burn.

When he spun back around to look at Katsuki, the fairy looked insufferably smug.

"Took me forever to figure out how to pull that off," he said.

"You've been working on this all month?" Shouto asked, awed.

Katsuki frowned. "Month? No, idiot... I've spent years putting that spell together."

"Years...?"

Katsuki shrugged. "I always figured that'd be what you wished for. I still don't know how to reverse the curse, so..."

"So you found the next best thing," Shouto said. "I'm... This is..."

"I know, I know." Katsuki waved a hand. "I'm amazing, it's fine to say it."

Shouto said frankly, "You're the best friend I've ever had."

Katsuki's jaw clenched in that way it did when he was embarrassed. "I'm, like, the fifth person you've ever spoken to in your life."

"Yeah," Shouto said, nodding, "that's how I know for sure."

"Okay," Katsuki said forcefully, "you need to get moving, this shit's gonna wear off at midnight. You don't have time to stand around like an idiot!"

"Oh—wait, how am I going to get there?" Shouto asked. *Should* he have taken Natsuo up on that ride from his friends?

"Come on," Katsuki scoffed, "*this* is where you doubt me? You think I don't have a ride lined up?"

"I don't see one anywhere."

"Then you better hold onto that cute little butt," Katsuki muttered, and before Shouto could process that, he put his fingers in his mouth and gave a clear, sharp whistle.

A huge shadow came swooping down from the sky, blotting out the moon as it soared past. Shouto looked up, open-mouthed—before he realized the shadow was descending, getting closer and closer, *right on top of him*.

He sprinted out from underneath, as a massive red dragon landed in the center of the garden, cracking one of the stone benches in the process. Katsuki, who had thrown himself in the other direction to avoid getting squashed, was bellowing at it from out of view.

"Are you serious?! Are you trying to kill him before I can even get him to the ball after I spent a *month* sorting him out? Watch where you're planting your ass next time!"

"Is that," Shouto said faintly, "a dragon."

It wasn't even a question because it was obviously a dragon. He just felt he should point it out. It was very much a dragon, here, in his family's garden.

"Yes," Katsuki said, "and he's how you're getting to the ball."

There was a beautiful red and orange carriage attached to the dragon, like a fire-



ball that would trail through the sky in his wake. Shouto wondered if he wouldn't get nauseous. But before he could feel too apprehensive, Katsuki was hurrying him to get in, and he had no choice but to climb aboard.

"Now remember," Katsuki said, leaning through one of the windows, "the spell will wear off at midnight, so find Kirishima before then—"

"Kirishima?"

"Him," Katsuki said, gesturing vaguely at all the dragon. "Find the *big red dragon*, and come back home, or your dad will definitely recognize you."

"Got it," Shouto said.

"Don't fuck up," Katsuki said.

"I'll try," Shouto told him. Then, on a whim: "Katsuki."

"Now what?"

Shouto leaned forward and brushed his lips hastily against the fairy's cheek.

"Thank you."

Katsuki didn't even seem that angry about it. He blinked, and then said, "You know, the prince might actually be dumb enough to like you. You'd make a matched set."

"Still not convinced I'm even going to get his attention," Shouto said. "But I appreciate the vote of confidence."

As Kirishima the dragon, and the carriage, and Shouto inside it began to lift off, Katsuki took a step back. Shouto watched him grow smaller, the gardens grow farther, the estate falling away as he left it for the first time in as long as he could remember.

Before he lost sight of Katsuki completely, he saw the fairy put his hand against his cheek, where Shouto had kissed him.



Traveling by dragon was *fast*.

Despite his late start, Shouto found himself soaring over the castle in no time at all. Below him, in the purple dusk of nightfall, he could see all the lights of the city flickering like hundreds of candles. And up ahead, the path marked by dozens of lantern-lit carriages winding their way to the royal palace.

It glowed like a beacon. Maybe it was magic, or maybe it was just how long he'd dreamt of seeing it, but the sight of it called to Shouto, beckoned him onward.

And it was getting very close—Kirishima was diving, and Shouto's heart jumped into his throat as they swooped down—the ground seemed to be rising up *far*

faster than was advisable—he braced himself against the door and grit his teeth to stop himself from shouting—

With a bone-rattling crash, the dragon and carriage landed in the roundabout in front of the steps leading up to the main entrance of the castle, narrowly missing taking the head off the resplendent old statue of one of the kingdom's past kings in the center plaza fountain.

It took Shouto some time to catch his breath. He wasn't sure if his legs were going to be steady enough to even get out of the carriage. He wished he had a mirror with him, but it seemed Katsuki's magic was strong enough to have kept his hair in place despite the rough landing.

It was the thought of Katsuki mocking him for hiding inside the carriage compartment that finally spurred him to moving. The door opened for him on its own, and he stepped out—the first thing he noticed was that there were a great many people about and they had all given the carriage a wide berth. The second thing he noticed was that they were all looking right at him.

Every instinct in him screamed to dive back inside, but the door snapped shut behind him as though it knew what he was thinking, and he remembered—it was fine for them to stare. Nobody would know who he was, and he was free of the cage besides. He straightened up and smoothed the front of his jacket.

"Thanks, Kirishima," he said.

"No problem!"

Stunned, Shouto turned around—to see the dragon had disappeared. In his place stood a handsome young man with red, spiked hair, not unlike the dragon's horns. When he grinned, it was to reveal a mouthful of pointed teeth.

"Just go straight in through those doors, there," Kirishima prompted him. "Good luck!"

He waved goodbye, so Shouto had no choice but to go, up the steps and through the grand entrance with everyone's eyes still on him, and then...

He was inside the royal palace.

It was like a dream. The soft glow of the lighting, the undercurrent of excitement in the murmured voices, the sumptuous attire and graceful gaiety of the crowd—it was all just as he'd hoped it would be, but a thousand times more wondrous to be in the midst of it all.

Shouto followed the flow of the other guests, and soon found himself entering the massive ballroom. Crystal chandeliers dripped from the high ceilings, and the floor swirled with a kaleidoscope of color, the jewel tones of hundreds of dancers all mingling and weaving together and apart.

Spellbound, Shouto drifted among them. Now that he was just another face in the crowd, nobody paid much attention to him. He kept his eyes peeled for Katsuki,

but knew he didn't have much hope of finding him. And Katsuki had never said he'd find Shouto at the ball—Shouto was sure he had been left to fend for himself. Still, he thought he would have liked to see Katsuki while he was there.

A thought struck him, one he hadn't been concerned with before: *would* he see Katsuki again after this?

It wasn't something they'd discussed. When they had first met, Katsuki had even said that he just wanted to get the whole wish granting business over with so that he wouldn't be stuck with Shouto anymore. And he'd done it, gone above and beyond merely getting Shouto to the ball. He'd done everything to make sure the night would be as close to perfect as possible.

Did that mean they were done with each other—that Katsuki was done with Shouto?

The thought was so overwhelming that it dulled his brilliant surroundings. Not watching where he was going, he knocked into someone very tall and solid.

"Sorry," he mumbled, with an apologetic nod.

"You should be more mindful of your surroundings," remarked the person he had bumped into, and Shouto nearly had a heart attack.

Todoroki Enji stood before him, staring down at him with what Shouto was sure would be a look of detached irritation, if he were foolish enough to meet his father's gaze. Katsuki's magic hadn't disguised his eyes, and he knew if his father saw his face, he would still recognize him.

"Have we..." Enji began to say, and Shouto startled away from him. Not trusting himself to speak again, he kept his head down and bowed, before turning to flee into the crowd.

He slammed right into one of the palace servants, of whom there were many whirling about the castle laden with trays of food and drink. This one was no different, carrying what must have been a polished tray with a hundred crystal flutes of some fizzing drink on it.

To his horror, Shouto watched as the entire tray was upended by the impact, flipping over as the girl lost her grip on it. It fell to the ground with a resounding crashing and clanging, the hundred glasses shattering across the floor as people shrieked and danced out of the way. Then there was only ringing silence, as if the whole ball had been brought to a halt by his outstanding clumsiness.

"Sorry," Shouto managed to choke out again, and then he ran.

That could not have started off worse. Not only had he run right into the one person he was meant to avoid, he'd attracted more attention to himself than Kirishima had as a dragon nearly destroying a royal ancestral landmark.

He escaped out the first door he saw, and found himself on a small balcony overlooking the castle grounds. The night air felt cool on his skin; he hadn't realized

how flushed he was. He grabbed onto the railing and willed his breathing to slow. This was fine. Perhaps this balcony could become his new home. It wasn't as though he had an agenda for the night, aside from sampling the food and watching the dances. He could just wait out here until everyone forgot he existed.

As the thought passed through his head, he heard the door open again behind him. Panic rising, he turned, sure he was about to come face to face with his father in a towering rage.

But it was only a boy.

Or rather, a young man, around Shouto's age. They blinked at each other, equally confused by one another's presence.

"Hi," said the other boy, "sorry, I didn't mean to startle you!"

"Oh," Shouto said, "I'm okay, I'm just..." Hiding.

"I saw what happened..." the boy said. "Are you alright? After all those glasses fell?"

"I'm fine," Shouto reassured him.

The boy beamed at him. He had a very friendly face, with lots of freckles. "Thank goodness—I was really worried."

"About... me?"

"Yeah! You ran out of there so fast I was worried you got hurt."

"Oh, no, that was just... mortification."

The boy fluttered his hands at Shouto as if to reassure him. "It happens to the best of us!"

"I've actually never had the opportunity to break quite that many things at once before," Shouto told him. Burn them to ashes, or freeze them until they cracked and shattered, maybe. "I don't get out much."

"Ah! Is this your first time to the castle, then?"

"It's my first time out of my—" He stopped himself before saying *house*, which sounded too pathetic. "My village."

The boy's eyes went round with wonder. "Then you definitely can't spend the night out here!"

"I won't, I'm just—" Shouto wasn't sure how he was going to explain the entire situation to this boy who had just appeared out of nowhere. Thankfully, he was at that very second given the perfect excuse. "Shit."

"What's wrong?"

Shouto, who had just seen his father heading toward the balcony doors, said,

"Nothing. Uh—I have to go, someone's looking for me and—"

"And you don't want to talk to them?" asked the boy. He was watching Shouto's face very intently.

Shouto didn't see any reason to lie. "I really do not."

"Okay then," said the boy, "follow me."

Without a moment's delay, he grabbed Shouto's hand—Shouto flinched instinctively, but the gloves held true, and the boy wasn't burned. They slipped back inside, still unseen, and Shouto let himself be led by hand onto the ballroom floor.

"Do you know this dance?"

Shouto *did* know it; he knew all of them now, and when his new and unexpected dance partner took his hand for the waltz, he found he could fall easily in step.

"I'm not the best dancer," the boy said, leaning in so Shouto could hear him over the music.

"That makes two of us," he confessed.

The boy laughed, and Shouto found himself transfixed. He could count on one hand the number of people he'd ever made laugh in his life. He was glad this man was now one of them, with the way it made his eyes crinkle shut and everything about him glow warm and bright.

"I just figured if we danced together, nobody would want to take you away from me," said the boy.

They had only known each other for five minutes and Shouto was already utterly resistant to the thought of anyone separating them. If anyone tried, Shouto would fight them. He'd even fight his own father.

"I don't think I asked for your name yet," the boy said.

"It's Shouto."

"*Shouto...*" The way the boy said his name was lovely; like he was discovering some wonderful new idea. "I think I'm glad you broke all those glasses, Shouto."

"Why?"

He gave Shouto another crinkle-eyed smile. "Because that's how I saw you."

And just like that, Todoroki Shouto fell in love.

It had always bothered him before to be seen, even when he told himself he could ignore the way strangers looked at him, his dirty face and clothes, and his cage. The few times he'd ever interacted with other people, even when their expressions remained neutral, their eyes told the full story. He unnerved others. Frightened them. Even in his own family, his siblings looked at him with pity. His father never truly looked at him at all. And his mother had hated to look at him so much, she'd

scarred him and then disappeared forever.

Now he was here, at the royal palace, in the arms of someone who saw him and wanted to dance.

A smile tugged at his lips in return, small but unstoppable. "I'm glad, too," he said. "But I also feel really bad for whoever had to clean all that up..."

The boy laughed, and Shouto was carried away on that sound, and the music, and the whirling of the chandelier ceiling above him as they spun round and round. He was still hopeless, but his newfound partner wasn't much better, and every time they stepped on one another's feet it made them laugh more than wince and their apologies themselves became a joke shared between them, because it was hard to feel sorry when you were having the time of your life.

They danced another song after the first, and another after that, and then *another*, even though Shouto knew it was proper to switch partners. It seemed neither of them cared, and so there was no need to stop—until yet another song ended, and someone cleared their throat loudly right next to them.

"So *this* is where you got to," a voice said, sudden and familiar.

Katsuki had appeared behind them. Shouto jumped, feeling oddly guilty; he opened his mouth to respond, and then realized—Katsuki wasn't even addressing him.

"Been looking all over the damn place for you," he was saying to the boy.

"Ah, sorry, Kacchan!"

Shouto looked back and forth between the two of them. He was now starting to suspect something.

"You could've told me before you went wandering off," Katsuki said, still annoyed. He hadn't looked at Shouto, yet, which was making Shouto's own annoyance mount.

"Hi," he said.

With the reluctance of a man being led to the gallows, Katsuki turned to face him. "Do you need something?" he grit out.

The boy was watching them with wide eyes. "Do you two know each other?"

Before Shouto could respond, Katsuki replied, "Never seen him before in my life, Your Highness."

The boy, who was actually Prince Izuku, said, "Oh."

Katsuki, who was ignoring the fixed stare Shouto was piercing him with, said, "Dinner is about to start."

"Already!" Izuku exclaimed, looking toward Shouto. "You'll join us, won't you?"



"Um," Shouto said. He thought he caught Katsuki rolling his eyes, but didn't dare look at him, not while he was still reeling with realization. "I can do that?"

"Consider this your formal invitation," Izuku said, holding his hand out. "I'd like to, um—I'd like to talk to you more."

There was no way in hell Shouto could say no to that; so, still avoiding Katsuki's eyes, he nodded and took the prince's hand.

He was led to the table where the royal family and those closest to them were seated. Katsuki had a spot there, as well as a woman who looked very much like him. There were quite a few of the advisors Katsuki had warned Shouto about, and many other nobles. Katsuki sat on one side of Izuku, and Shouto, whose awkwardness levels were climbing to their peak, sat on the other.

Everyone was far too interested in Shouto for his liking. Izuku was very enthusiastic in introducing him, which meant he couldn't simply pretend not to be there. He recognized the titles of all the nobles Izuku rattled off thanks to Katsuki's tutoring, and when he smoothly selected the correct fork to use for the salad, he could have sworn he caught Katsuki exhaling with relief.

On the other hand, Izuku was so engrossed in what Shouto had to say about working as a blacksmith's apprentice (Shouto conveniently neglected to mention that his father was the blacksmith in question) that he picked up the wrong set of cutlery entirely, and nearly missed his mouth with his fork.

"Your Highness...?" one of his advisors asked, looking distressed at this grave lapse in etiquette.

Izuku looked at him, smiled, and went back to using the wrong fork. On his other side, Katsuki smirked, stabbed a large hunk of quail on the end of his knife, and shoveled the whole thing into his mouth.

Toward the end of the meal before dessert had been served, Izuku was pulled up to make a speech to the ballroom, which left the seat between Katsuki and Shouto vacated. Shouto checked to make sure the rest of the table was focused on their own conversations before swiveling to face Katsuki.

"Why are you being weird?" he whispered.

The fairy scowled at him. "The hell does that mean?"

"Pretending we haven't met?"

"What do you want me to do, introduce you as the guy I've been secretly training to sneak into the ball because his dad's a paranoid asshole?"

"You could make it sound more normal than that. Say I'm your friend."

"Coming from me, that would be even *weirder*. You're the one who didn't want anyone to notice you in the first place!"

"Not the prince, though," Shouto muttered. "I just didn't expect to get to talk to

him *this* much.”

“Well, congratulations,” Katsuki said. “Everything you hoped it’d be?”

Shouto didn’t know what the fairy saw in his expression—he wasn’t sure what his face was doing, but whatever it was, it made Katsuki roll his eyes.

“That’s what I thought,” he said. “Knew you two would be all gross and lovey-dovey right off the bat.”

He said it like he couldn’t care less. Shouto frowned.

“Katsuki...”

There was something he kept wondering the past few weeks while listening to Katsuki’s stories, the thing he couldn’t put his finger on, the reason his stomach had started feeling funny as soon as Katsuki had turned up and he had figured out who Izuku really was.

“Spit it out,” said Katsuki, so Shouto did.

“Are you eligible to marry the prince?” He wasn’t sure that Katsuki had heard him at first. The question was met with a blank stare, almost no change in expression. “The invitation said—”

“I *know* what the *invitation* said!” Katsuki hissed, suddenly furious. It wasn’t like his usual brand of anger, which was harmless and quick to fade. There was a glint of alarm in his eyes that gave him the appearance of an animal backed into a corner, ready to strike.

Before Shouto could try to backtrack, Izuku returned and Katsuki went silent, leaving Shouto to regret opening his mouth at all.

“Glad that’s over with,” said the prince, dropping back into his chair. “I’m no good at giving speeches.” When neither of them answered him, he started to look concerned. “Did something happen while I was gone?”

“No,” Katsuki said, before Shouto could speak. “Your speech was so boring I nearly fell asleep listening.”

“The elders rejected most of the changes I wanted to make to it,” Izuku said glumly.

“You should just let me write them from now on,” Katsuki said.

“As much as I appreciate the offer, I don’t want to scare everyone away, either,” said Izuku. “Shouto, how are you finding everything?”

“Good,” Shouto said, despite still feeling like there was a large and heavy stone in his stomach. Katsuki was back to not looking at him.

“I was thinking, after dinner,” Izuku said, “maybe I could show you around the castle? If you’d like!”

Shouto would have liked nothing better—only he couldn't stop thinking about Katsuki's wide eyes, and obnoxious smile, and how he talked about Izuku like he couldn't help but know him better than anyone else in the world.

But it was Izuku looking at Shouto, hopeful and a little hesitant, and Shouto only had *one night* of freedom.

"If you have enough time to spare," Shouto said, and the prince's entire face lit up even brighter.

They snuck away just after dessert. Izuku waited until the advisors at the table were sufficiently distracted and then motioned for Shouto to follow him.

"It seems like you have to do a lot of escaping from your advisors," Shouto observed.

Izuku had the grace to look abashed. "They mean well... they're just a little overbearing."

"Believe me, I know what that's like," Shouto said.

"Really?"

"Yeah, my dad is a little intense."

"Is that why you've never left your village?"

Shouto sighed. "That's most of the reason."

"Ah, we don't have to talk about it, if you'd rather not," Izuku said, picking up on his reticence. "Sorry, I'm just so curious after... well, anyway. What parts of the castle were you interested in seeing?"

"Uhhh..." Where to even begin? "All of it?"

Izuku grinned. "Good answer."

As it turned out, the crown prince was a bit of a history buff. He knew all the most interesting spots in the castle, and was able to talk about the history behind each and every room—and he could really *talk*, a mile a minute, illustrating his stories with expansive gestures to Shouto as he waxed on about that tapestry here, that suit of armor there.

Shouto got to see rooms both big and small, grand, and simple. The kitchens were huge but functional; the throne room was shining and ornate; the library he could have lost himself in for days.

The palace was as wondrous as he could have hoped for, but the main thing he found he couldn't tear his eyes from was Izuku.

He was different to what Shouto had expected. He wasn't exactly handsome, not like in the stories. His cheeks were too rounded, eyes too big, curls too wild, to be called manly and dashing. His smile was a bit wobbly around the edges, and he was constantly a bit sweaty, even long after they'd stopped dancing. He was every

bit as human as Katsuki's stories had made him sound.

But somehow, he shined like the brightest characters from the pages of a novel; not just a prince, but a hero. He'd even swooped in to rescue Shouto when he'd needed it most.

It was no wonder Katsuki was so loyal, despite how much he acted like he couldn't care less.

Even knowing it was a bad idea, Shouto had to ask. He couldn't go without hearing the other side of the story after spending so much time with Katsuki. By the time they'd made it out to the palace gardens, he'd worked up his nerve.

"Last stop," Izuku announced, indicating the rose bushes with a sweeping gesture of his arms. He gave a dramatic little bow. "We at the royal palace hope you enjoyed your complimentary tour, and also that the tour guide didn't bore you to tears."

Shouto shot him a look of reproach. "Don't be ridiculous." When Izuku started to laugh, he belatedly revised to, "Don't be ridiculous, *Your Highness*."

"Nice save," Izuku said, still giggling. "Though I think having said that, at this point you could just call me Izuku."

"Could I?"

"If you want!"

It was so strange how it really felt like he could. Maybe it was because he knew so few people, that Izuku didn't feel off limits or out of reach just because he was a prince. It wasn't like Shouto had a lot of non-prince references to go off of. But he got the feeling this was just how Izuku was.

"I never thought I'd get to do something like this," Shouto said. "Not just... come to the castle. To meet someone and have them want to—to talk to me..."

Izuku watched him quietly. When Shouto floundered, unsure of how to continue, he prompted, "What changed?"

There was one answer to that question, one person who had literally exploded into his life and turned it around by granting a single wish.

"Can I ask you something?" Shouto asked.

"Of course," said Izuku immediately, "anything."

"Do you love Katsuki?"

For the second time that night, Shouto observed as he made someone's eyes go wide over a question that was far too personal, and thought, *you'd think I would have learned my lesson the first time*. But instead of looking trapped like Katsuki had, Izuku's expression transformed into something different—something that looked almost like relief.

"I do," Izuku said, and now he was smiling again. "I always have."

Shouto's breath caught in his throat. There it was; the answer to the question he'd had all these weeks. He hadn't realized he'd been dreading it until it was too late.

"Shouto," Izuku said, "I wanted to—"

The clock struck midnight.

Shouto jerked away from Izuku—all night, he had only wanted more time, even while he knew he had to be mindful of how late it was getting. But Izuku's charm and cheer had made him forget, or perhaps he just ignored the clock in a futile effort to make things last. But now his time had run out.

"Shouto...?"

"I have to go," he blurted, backing away from the prince.

"What?" Izuku asked, confused. "Right now?"

"Yes, I—I'm sorry—" With horror, he saw the ends of his suit cuffs were starting to fray. "I can't be here."

He turned and ran back along the garden path, wanting to escape before Izuku saw him in his blacksmith's rags. He ran from the prince who looked at him and saw just another boy, not a monster; ran from the fairy who had taken his hand and pulled him out of his cage.

He ran from them both, because he could never have chosen between them, and he knew they would never choose him over each other.

The path led him around, back to the front of the castle where Kirishima was waiting. He could see the red carriage now, a safe haven right in front of him as his pristine white boots melted back into the clomping, soot-caked footwear he was used to. The soft blue of his suit was melting back into work pants and a faded white shirt scarred with burns and dirt. His hair was beginning to fall into his eyes. Only his gloves still seemed intact.

He reached the carriage and flung the door open, but the prince had caught up to him.

"Shouto, please wait!"

Before Shouto could decide whether to leap inside or turn and face him, Izuku reached out and grabbed his hand, his fire-cursed left.

All the fear and pain came rushing back to Shouto at once, as strong as they had been when he was five, and he thought he'd killed his little feline friend. Only this was Izuku, this was the boy Katsuki loved—Shouto couldn't bear the thought of ever hurting him. He thought of Katsuki, looking at him the way his mother had before she disfigured him. He'd rather be locked away forever.

"No!" he cried, tearing his hand from Izuku's grasp. Izuku had grabbed him so

tightly that his glove slipped off, but he let it go and jumped inside the carriage. "Take me home, Kirishima," he whispered, and somehow the dragon must have heard him, because with a huge sweep of his wings, they were in the air.

Izuku braced himself against the gust of wind, looking hopelessly up at the carriage. "There's something I need to ask you, too!" he called.

But by then they were too high up, and the prince and the castle were getting smaller and smaller. In the reflection of the window, Shouto could see the black of his hair fading back into red and white. Beyond it the castle still glowed, but that too faded as they flew farther, back toward home, back toward his cage.

He touched his fingers to the glass. It was only then that he realized there was no frost spreading over the glass, no icy barrier appearing to block his view of the world beyond.

Katsuki's magic was still working, stronger than any curse or midnight bell.



One thing Izuku never forgot was that he loved Katsuki.

He had for as long as he could remember. It was something he'd grown up knowing—and it was why it had hurt especially when they were small and Katsuki had pushed him away, been angry with him for reasons Izuku couldn't understand. It was why he'd never given up trying to mend whatever thing it was that had broken between them. It was why when they *had* started to feel like friends again, he was so happy he'd never even considered pushing for more. He would love Katsuki however Katsuki would let him for the rest of his life, and he was content with that.

So when Izuku had learned about Shouto when they were still kids, he had actually been pretty damn pleased about it.

He hadn't found out from Katsuki—it was Mitsuki who had let it slip to him one day, and in her defense, he didn't think she realized her son had never told him. Katsuki, bless him, still thought Izuku had no idea. As painfully sweet as it was that someone like Katsuki spent so much time worrying over his charge, Izuku knew he would be horrified to hear anyone else had realized, let alone Izuku of all people.

But it was also a bit idiotic to think Izuku didn't know anything about it, not when they could never escape each other. Izuku knew Katsuki almost better than he knew himself, sometimes; it was hard not to notice him poring over books and spells regarding elemental magic, disappearing for days on end and returning with frost on his clothes. Sometimes he mumbled Shouto's name in his sleep.

Izuku never wondered if Katsuki ever dreamed about him, too. And things were getting better between them by the day and—well, wasn't that the most he could ask for?



He had spent so many years... never *expecting* anything, but *hoping*. How he'd hoped.

But it had still seemed impossible, until he'd turned twenty, and the plans for the ball had been announced, and Katsuki started to act even more abrasive than usual. He'd raged at the advisors for insinuating Izuku was only to consider certain "viable" choices from the guest list, before turning around and snapping at Izuku for suggesting he be allowed to choose who he spent the rest of his life with for himself, thanks. He'd even been rude to the queen over the table decorations (although he had apologized to her later—she was the only one who could ever get him to say sorry).

He'd been in general even more insufferable than normal, until one day, a little over a month before the ball, he'd up and disappeared. When he turned up the next day, something had changed; Katsuki was happy, or as close to it as he ever got, and even with the ball approaching, he seemed strangely to have made his peace with it. And somehow, Izuku just *knew*.

The next time Katsuki had left the castle, Izuku followed him—the fairy could teleport, but that wasn't going to help him hide his tracks from Izuku, who was obsessive, possessed a freakish level of attention to detail, and most importantly, had befriended Kirishima years ago. They both had a sixth sense when it came to Katsuki, and with how fast Kirishima could cover ground it took almost no time at all to locate the village on the edge of the kingdom where he'd been disappearing to. There was some guilt that came along with the spying, but it was also a good idea to make sure Katsuki wasn't planning some sort of coup against the kingdom in order to get out of attending the ball (he had attempted this once when he was nine which, incidentally, was how they'd met Kirishima). So at least there was some moral precedent, however slim.

But they could spot no coup-planning to speak of once they'd arrived. Instead, they found only a forge, and a strange quiet boy, living inside a cage.

It was Shouto. Izuku had never seen him before, but he knew it had to have been. It was Shouto that Katsuki was lecturing, dancing with, telling stories to—stories about him and Izuku, their adventures, their victories, and defeats. Shouto listened to him with rapt attention, as though they were tales of great heroes, and not just two foolish boys with a knack for leading each other into trouble.

It was the first time Izuku had ever heard Katsuki talk about him like that, talk about *them* like that, with so much pride (though he tried hard to disguise it—Izuku would take what he could get). For maybe the first time ever, Izuku had proof that it wasn't only him that had cherished those times: the freedom, the thrill of feeling like it was the two of them against the world. Katsuki wove threads from his memory to drape over all three of them, like a warm soft blanket pulled up to Shouto's chin, whose wide eyes begged to know: *and then what happened?*

And Shouto's only wish had been to meet the prince in those stories; to see for himself what Izuku was really like.

This was how Izuku fell in love all over again for the second time in his life. Except he didn't love Katsuki any less, only more. After that, nothing seemed impossible.

Nothing except getting Katsuki to admit he was in love with Shouto, because Izuku had been trying for weeks now with no luck whatsoever. He'd tried in the month leading up to the ball, but Katsuki remained tight-lipped about where he was going and what he was doing (and who he was seeing). He'd tried *at* the ball, but either they'd agreed to it beforehand or Shouto was just following Katsuki's lead, because they had pretended not to know each other. And he'd tried after it was over, after Shouto had run away out of fear Izuku would discover who he truly was; but Katsuki *still* wouldn't tell him even now that they'd met.

The problem was this: Katsuki was determined to act like he had no idea who Shouto was, likely because showing any emotion other than "murder" was unthinkable to him. And then Izuku realized of *course* Katsuki had to pretend not to know; he still thought Izuku didn't know. And Izuku couldn't very well say, *surprise, I've known about your secret and extremely adorable pining for years, I just didn't want you to kill me if I told you*, so now here they were. Stuck.

(Izuku could very well have said he knew about the secret pining, but the truth was that he still did not want Katsuki to kill him if he found out, so he was admittedly being pretty chickenshit about it. Regardless, he wanted to exhaust all other avenues before walking face first into sure and certain doom.)

This had led to Izuku becoming a little bit desperate. Which was how the Kingdom-Wide Search for the Owner of the White Glove plan was born.

"This is so fucking stupid," Katsuki said.

They were standing outside the forge of a small village—the *wrong* forge, in the *wrong* village, a fact of which Izuku was aware, and was also aware that Katsuki was aware. Katsuki, on the other hand, just thought he was an idiot, but what else was new.

"You miss one hundred percent of the shots you don't take, Kacchan," Izuku replied cheerfully, though on the inside he was dying. This would be so much easier if they both weren't so good at dramatically miscommunicating with each other.

Izuku hadn't *thought* it would be this difficult at first. Honestly, he kinda thought someone else would be able to tell him pretty quick who Shouto was—this assumption proved vastly incorrect.

"Why didn't you find out his last name, you fool?" Katsuki asked, not for the first time.

"That would have seemed, I don't know, weird and forced?" Izuku said. "Plus, he seemed to not want to talk about his family much..."

"Since when has that stopped you from being nosy as hell?"

"Kacchan! I just—I didn't want to..." Izuku sighed heavily again. "I liked him."

It felt strange to admit out loud in front of Katsuki, given everything he knew, and everything he'd felt over the years.

But Katsuki merely looked resigned. "I know you did. So you better get a move on."

This forge wasn't the first they had visited, and it almost certainly wouldn't be the last, the way things were going. The blacksmith's family that lived there were just as congenial and accommodating as the last they'd visited. They were shocked to have the prince and his very recognizable fae companion come calling; naturally, because none of them were the boy Izuku was looking for, and had no idea what he wanted. He soldiered on anyway.

"You are all too kind!" Izuku told them, after being offered tea, and sandwiches, and cakes. "But I am on a mission of great haste and cannot tarry."

Katsuki made some kind of nauseated sound from behind him, which he always did whenever Izuku used his "brainless prince voice," as he called it.

"What mission, Your Highness?" asked the blacksmith.

"I am seeking the hand of a lost love," Izuku said, "for I know not to whom it belongs, and have only this single token to guide my path." Amidst a chorus of sympathetic gasps, he produced The Glove—still perfectly white and unwrinkled. "Whosoever fits this glove must my true love be!"

Following this grand declaration was a period of stunned silence. Izuku tried not to let his smile falter.

"Er..." the blacksmith said, "I think... our youngest attended?"

The girl in question gave a start. "But I didn't—"

"You wore white gloves, didn't you, dear?" her mother insisted.

This was the most awkward part—when people realized that all they needed to do to gain a prince as an in-law was have their single sons or daughters fit their hand into a simple glove.

With no small amount of ceremony, Izuku approached her to have her try it on. She gulped as he bowed and then held out the glove, and as everyone watched with bated breath, she gingerly slipped her hand inside.

It went on easily; technically speaking, it fit. But her hands were small, nothing like a true blacksmith's hands, and the glove was loose and overly large, visibly sagging at the fingertips. Her parents deflated a little in disappointment. It unmistakably did not belong to her.

But this was the part on which his plan hinged.

Izuku rubbed his chin and then said, "Wow... I think we've got a winner!"

Everyone looked at him in shock. "Y-your Highness?"

"What," Katsuki said flatly.

"I suppose we'll have to bring you back to the castle—we'll need to go through a few more tests, naturally—"

"*Izuku!*" Katsuki hissed.

"Yes, Lord Katsuki?" Izuku said politely. Katsuki grabbed him by the arm and pulled him outside the room. "Give us just a moment!" Izuku called out to the family.

"Have you gone insane?" Katsuki demanded.

"What do you mean, Kacchan?"

"The glove didn't remotely fit!"

"I did *fit*," Izuku pointed out. "It went on."

"It was about to fall off of her damn hand."

"Your complaint last time—"

"My complaint last time," Katsuki growled, "and the time before that, and the *time before that*, was that the glove doesn't fit any of the people you're putting it on, but you seem to be somehow blind to that fact!"

He was right. They'd been to several forges now, and even with a wide variety of hands to choose from, not a single one could have been taken for Shouto's. The glove just didn't *suit* anybody else.

"That woman two towns back was pretty close, though!" Izuku said.

"She was at least *forty*," Katsuki said, "and *married*. And a *woman*."

"He was disguised, Katsuki," Izuku reminded him.

"Not *that* disguised!"

"You're probably right," Izuku sighed. "Well, I guess we'll just have to move on to the next—"

"Do you not care about him at all?!" Katsuki demanded, voice rising dangerously. In the next room, their hosts had become very quiet.

Izuku dropped his flippant tone. "I do care. But so do you, Katsuki." Katsuki turned away from him, gripping at his hair in frustration. "You're not telling me something."

"I *can't*," Katsuki looked at him again, a plea bleeding into his voice. "I promised I wouldn't."

Oh. *Oh*—Izuku had been so stupid.

He knew a little bit about wish granting fairies, he had to have picked up some

things after so many years. He knew after the initial wish was granted, they generally had to step back out of the picture and let things run their course. They were never intended to make events turn out perfectly; only to give things a nudge in the desired direction. And on top of that, if somebody had *asked* Katsuki not to interfere, especially if it was the person he'd been tasked with helping in the first place...

"Okay," Izuku said. "Okay..." He cast his mind about, trying to search for an answer that wouldn't cause his friend to feel like his help was a betrayal. A conversation he'd had weeks ago, before he'd started his search, came bubbling up in his memory. "When I was asking around for information, I spoke to a few of the messengers we sent out to deliver the invitation. One of them mentioned... he'd met somebody really strange at a village forge. A mechanical boy, but he hadn't seen them at the ball..."

Katsuki looked torn between hope and uncertainty. He was still unwilling to give up the secret Shouto had entrusted him with.

"I know there was something Shouto didn't want me to know," Izuku said. "Some reason why he was stuck in his village, and why he had to run away. Maybe this mechanical boy has something to do with it? It might be good to go check it out."

It had taken forever, but he thought he might finally have made some progress when Katsuki, looking relieved more than anything else, nodded in agreement.



There was something especially bitter about risking freedom for one night, only to lock himself back up in the end.

Shouto knew in his heart it was for the best, but that didn't make it any easier. Coming home and tucking his remaining glove away inside his favorite book brought him to tears, even if they were quickly wiped away. He would have to return to the cage again, now.

He'd gotten what he wanted; he had spent his night at the castle. He should have been happy.

What he hadn't planned for was to fall in love with both his new friends—to find they were both so much more real and wondrous than any ink and parchment. But they loved each other, and there was no space for him between the pages.

He hadn't even caved when Katsuki came to find him, because Katsuki didn't know. Neither of them realized how they felt about each other, but one day they would, and Shouto couldn't get in the way of all that history. It would be even worse to be discarded then. He made Katsuki swear he wouldn't tell Izuku where he was.

Izuku would never find him. He was Cinderoki; nobody knew his name.

The thing about the heroes in fairy tales was, they always found a way to win, and they always found a way to save the people who needed them.

He spent more time in the garden now than he had before meeting Katsuki. It was still a bit painful because of the memories, but he preferred that to having none or avoiding it entirely because it reminded him of the absence of his mother.

There was one huge tree that happened to grow outside the garden wall, its boughs overhanging a bench Shouto liked to sit on. He liked that the tree had snuck inside to join the other plants; it was a connection to the outside world.

He was sitting under the tree, hidden away from everything but his own thoughts, when a rustling in the leaves caught his attention. He looked up, expecting to see one of his squirrel or bird friends.

Instead, he found himself staring into a pair of huge green eyes, set in a very familiar freckled face.

"What," he said, sure he was seeing things, and then Prince Izuku yelped and fell out of the tree right in front of him, landing with a horribly loud *thump* that suggested it wasn't his imagination at all.

"Owowow," Izuku said, sitting up wincing.

An explosion signaled Katsuki's arrival next. He dragged Izuku to his feet, already berating him.

"How are you so bad at everything, I told you to be careful—"

"The branch broke, what am I supposed to do about that?!"

"Pick a better branch next time!"

"When is there likely to *be* a next time—"

"Um," Shouto said, and they both stopped arguing, "what the hell?"

A smile spread over Izuku's face like a cracked egg releasing its golden, delicious innards everywhere (which was a weird way to think of it but Shouto was, at that point, half-mad with missing him).

"It *is* you!" Izuku cried out, pointing at him in triumph. "Katsuki, we found him!"

"Wow, it's a damn miracle," Katsuki said, voice so dry it was in danger of going up in flame.

Shouto remembered himself. "I have never seen either of you before in my life—"

"For fuck's sake," Katsuki said, "just make him try on the glove, I'll hold him down if I have to."

"You *swore* you wouldn't tell," Shouto said, giving up on the pretense, since it was obviously no use.



"He didn't," Izuku said. He took a cautious step toward Shouto. In his hand, he held the glove. "I figured it out. He kept your secret, which was very stupid of you both, by the way."

"It's not stupid," Shouto said. He felt like he was choking. He wanted to reach out, wanted to put on the glove, Katsuki's gift to him. He wanted to feel safe again. "Why did you come looking for me?"

"Do me the favor of seeing if this fits," Izuku said, "and we'll tell you."

He couldn't resist that any more than he could stifle his own magic. And he wanted to *know*. Shouto held out his hand.

Izuku's own hands were steady as they slipped the glove on. Even with the threat of being burned he didn't waver, and Shouto trusted him, and he *didn't* burn him. The glove went on perfectly smooth.

It occurred to Shouto that he'd stepped inside the cage in order to get the glove on. He'd almost forgotten he was wearing it at the sight of them, and now Izuku had ignored it entirely to get close, undeterred by the sharp ends, the nightmare silhouette. The arms encircled them both.

Izuku took Shouto's hand in both of his—took the hand of the boy at the heart of the monster. Some heroes slayed dragons; others befriended them.

He flipped Shouto's hand over, right as the rose sigil in the center of the glove began to glow.

"See," Izuku said, and when he looked up at Shouto, it was with that wobbly smile, eyes wet to match. "I knew you were the one."

He drew Shouto into a hug, and Shouto didn't protest—just hugged him tightly back, careful to keep his frozen hand at a safe distance. Izuku was solid and warm.

Over Izuku's shoulder, Katsuki was watching them.

"You really didn't tell," Shouto said.

"No," Katsuki told him. "But I wanted to, you asshole. That was a shit thing to make me swear to."

"I know," Shouto said.

"Why?" Izuku asked. He drew back from Shouto to look at him, which made Shouto feel bereft. "Why did you run?"

"Because..." Shouto looked between them. What harm could it hurt to confess now? At least he'd gotten to see them one more time. "I love you. *Both* of you."

They looked astonished. "But," Izuku said, eyes wide, "then why did you run from us?"

Shouto almost rolled his eyes. How could they still not *know*? "Because you're both

in love with each other!”

He hadn’t wanted to do that—it wasn’t his place to say it for them. But also... it served them right.

Katsuki stepped forward after a long moment of silence, hands balled into fists at his sides. “You oblivious idiot,” he said, voice shaking. Shouto braced himself for the oncoming fury. “You absolute *coward!*”

“Kacchan!” Izuku gasped.

The accusation hurt, but Shouto didn’t flinch from it. “If it means you two will be happy, then I don’t care what you call me.”

“To hell with that,” Katsuki said. “You don’t get to run away!”

“Katsuki—”

“You *just* met us, and you’re already giving up!” Katsuki shouted. “I waited twenty years for you, and I *never* gave up on you! I messed up everything with him our whole lives—” He stabbed a finger in Izuku’s direction. “—and he never gave up on *me!*”

Shouto sucked in a breath. “Wait—”

“You didn’t need me for twenty years, and Izuku sure as hell doesn’t need me after everything I did, but I tried everything to make it so you could be together!” Katsuki stormed closer, close enough to grab the limbs of the cage and rattle them. “*You don’t get to run away.*”

Shouto barely registered Izuku extricating himself from the cage, sliding his hands over Katsuki’s to ease them off. He was too shaken to process anything properly. He’d thought he was helping. He was so used to shuttering his own happiness in darkness that he’d never even stopped to consider what it meant to *them* when he had turned his back on them.

“You—” He could barely get his voice above a whisper. “You want me to stay?”

Izuku shuffled his feet. “I need to tell you both something.” Listening seemed easier than talking for Shouto, so he just nodded. Katsuki watched the prince expectantly. “I’ve... I knew about Shouto the whole time. I have for years.”

Well. That was a revelation.

Katsuki’s eyes were narrowing dangerously. “*You little—*”

“I thought you didn’t want to tell me,” Izuku said hurriedly. Shouto got the impression he wanted to say everything he needed to before his demise. “I could—could tell you loved him, and I figured maybe you’d leave one day for him. And I was okay with that! Or—I thought I was, but then I saw you two together, and I *met* Shouto, and I... I still want you both to be happy together. But I don’t want that to mean I lose either of you.”

"Oh..." Shouto said.

"I wanted to ask you something at the ball, remember?" Izuku said, turning to him. "Shouto, I wanted to ask if you were in love with Katsuki, too."

Shouto stared at him, shocked. *That's* what he wanted to ask? And if Shouto had just stayed, had answered him instead of running... the answer had been so easy. He'd *really* overcomplicated this.

Katsuki wheezed, "You're both the worst."

"Yeah," Shouto said, "I love him." Izuku, who had known the answer all along, smiled.

"I hate you both," Katsuki said.

"Can we take that to mean you feel the same way?" Izuku needled him.

Katsuki put his hands over his face, which did not disguise the fact that he was turning very red. "Yeah... I mean, yeah, he said it, didn't he?"

"You know, you could've told me a million years ago how you felt, Kacchan. We could have avoided all this."

"Shut up."

"*And* Kirishima brought him to the ball, did you expect me not to notice—"

"Shut *up*."

Shouto felt it all slotting into place, all the plot threads of his life coming together. "What now?" he asked.

"Can we help you take this off?" Izuku asked, looking over the cage.

"Oh, right." Shouto shook his head. "I can do it."

And he did. This time, when he pulled himself free, he didn't feel uncertain about it. The cage stood empty in the garden; it didn't need him to fill it anymore. And he no longer needed its protection.

It still startled him a little, when Izuku took his left hand and raised it to his lips to brush a kiss to his gloved knuckles.

"Thank you," the prince said, and Shouto felt all the wind get knocked out of him.

"For what?" he asked. He owed them all his thanks, not the other way around.

But Izuku said, "For making your wish."

Shouto swallowed the lump that had suddenly made itself known in his throat. "I'm glad I finally did."

Izuku looked at the third member of their trio. "Kacchan?"

Katsuki shook his head. "We're gonna have to get the other glove if you want me to hold his hand, that shit is cold as *hell*."

"It's in the house," Shouto told him apologetically.

Sure, not everything was perfect. He wasn't looking forward to having to explain things to his father, and he was still cursed on top of it. But his curse was a part of who he was, and they loved him anyway. It was enough just to—

"I think I can figure out how to break the curse now, though," Katsuki said.

Okay, screw that bittersweet bullshit.

"How?" Shouto demanded.

"Won't be easy," Katsuki admitted. "We'd probably need to visit the north fae... the journey alone is already a bitch and a half and that's not counting everything we'll need to do afterwards."

"We'll need time to prepare..." Izuku said.

"You'd come with us?" Shouto asked, surprised.

"Of course I would!" Izuku said. "It's been too long since we went on an adventure, hasn't it, Kacchan?"

"It's been too long since I could blow stuff up without getting nagged at," Katsuki grumbled, which passed as agreement.

"I want to do it," Shouto said. "When can we leave?"

"Slow your roll, hotshot," Katsuki told him. "We gotta get you back to the castle and everything first, get you settled in. And..."

"What?"

"It's nothing, don't worry about it."

"*Kacchan*."

Katsuki rubbed the back of his neck. "My old lady helped me out with some of the magic I used for your gloves... she thinks Shouto's mom might be with the northern fae people."

"Isn't that a good thing?" Izuku asked, confused.

There was still so much he didn't know—so much Shouto and Katsuki would be able to tell him now.

For the time being, Shouto left it at, "It's complicated."

"Would you be ready for it?" Katsuki asked him.

Shouto looked him in the eyes and nodded. "I feel ready for anything."

Izuku beamed. "Then it looks like you're coming with us."

When they looked back at Shouto, he knew he could tackle any adventure, as long as he had them. He'd never felt more ready. After so many years, he wanted something for himself; wanted *them* enough to make his own happy ending.

Now his own story could finally begin.

He knew he could  
tackle any adventure  
as long as he had  
them.















# Love Goes On and On

A Robin Hood AU by EmeraldWaves

The sound of carriage wheels rumbled against the earth, the bumping loud, even from a distance. The blond smirked, tilting his head toward the direction of the sound.

"Oh," he chuckled, fluttering his eyelashes playfully. "What is this I hear? A rich carriage coming down the way?"

Twirling on his foot, he immediately changed directions.

"Dabi! Dabi, Dabi," he urged, "Come, come."

A groan escaped the lips of the tired man. "Hawks, what the hell are you doing?" he snorted, turning to see his (stupid) best friend ducking behind a bush as he moved closer to the road.

"Come here," he said, waving his hand frantically, like the wing of a bird desperate to stay in the air.

Dabi rolled his eyes. "What?"

"Do you not hear the sound of the carriage?!" he asked, his voice changing to a hushed whisper.

Dabi raised an eyebrow, glancing around skeptically. "I don't hear anything."

Groaning, Hawks stood up and yanked Dabi forward, tugging him behind the bush. "That's because you're stupid," he snorted, pushing the other man's dark head down.

"Are you serious right now?" Dabi asked, growling and staring up at Hawks.

"I'm always serious," Hawks nodded, peering out from the bush. "It's been a while since we've done something like this and I'm sure the town could use our help." There was a twinkle in Hawks' eyes, one that Dabi knew would be impossible to fight against. Once Hawks had an idea, it was next to impossible to stop him.

"Whatever," Dabi grumbled.

Hawks' gaze stayed fixated on the road, waiting for the carriage to come into sight. "You know what to do," he nodded. "You distract, and I'll snatch whatever I can get."

"Yup," Dabi sighed.

"Oh, c'mon! It's been awhile since we've had a bit of fun," Hawks chuckled. "Besides, you know how fast I am."

"Yeah, yeah," Dabi sighed. He was more than used to Hawks' schemes and plans. Generally, speaking, Dabi went along with them because he had nothing better to do, but as the carriage began to roll down the street, he realized he was more than willing to comply.

"Oh-" Hawks began to say and Dabi smirked, standing up.

"Oh yeah, I've got this."

"Wait, Dabi-" Hawks began to say, but the dark-haired male sauntered onto the street, stepping right in the pathway of the horses.

The moment it turned the corner, both of them were well aware of whose carriage it was, of course. Todoroki Enji, the prince, had a very distinctive design on his carriage. Streaks of red and gold, which mimicked flames trailed across the side and bright orange wheels spun against the ground.

Hawks swallowed. Of all the people to run into today, this was not who he had expected. On top of that, he and Dabi should have switched places. Sure, the prince hadn't seen his estranged son in quite some time and Dabi purposefully had changed his appearance but...

And then, of course, there was the fear that *she* would be with the prince.

However, Dabi was more than happy to do anything to ruin his dear ol' father's life, even if it meant potentially getting caught.

Hawks would just have to be faster than normal.

The horses whinnied upon seeing Dabi, their hooves flying up in the air, stopping the carriage short, the wheels spinning awkwardly as it swerved.

"Ah! Woah! Woah!" The woman in the front gasped, tugging on the reins of the horses to pull them in, but Dabi was one step ahead of them. He fell to the ground dramatically, groaning, his hand over his eye, as if he had been kicked in the face by one of the horses.

"Kamiji!" Enji's voice boomed from inside the carriage. "What is the meaning of this?"

Sucking in a sharp breath of air, Hawks dashed forward, rolling closer to the carriage. He watched Enji peer out of the side, opening the door as he did.

"Sire, there's no need to come out. I can handle it," she said, stepping down from the top of the carriage, her wild, flame-like hair cascaded around her neck and shoulders, bouncing as she hopped onto the ground.

"You better..." Enji grumbled, still peering out the window. Obviously, the prince didn't enjoy being interrupted on his journey back to the castle.

Admittedly, Hawks was simply happy the prince was alone.

Dabi let out loud groans, writhing about on the ground as if he were in great pain. He was incredible at faking stuff like that and Hawks never questioned why. Though he did have a feeling it had something to do with the man riding in the carriage.

"Are you alright?" he heard the woman say, and he glanced back, watching as she leaned over Dabi's body. The back of the carriage was surprisingly unguarded and if Enji had any of his riches, they would most likely be there.

Slipping behind the cart, he lifted the curtain and pressed down on the small wooden latch, his heart throbbing. Stealing wasn't difficult for him; Hawks had been doing it for as long as he could remember. In fact, stealing was how he had met Dabi in the first place.

However, stealing from the prince was a very different story. Not that Hawks really feared being unable to escape. No, he could escape from any situation with ease, it was his special talent. But there was a small hint of guilt, stealing from the prince... all because of... *her*.

Hawks quickly shook his head. He didn't have time to space out right now.

He lifted the trunk, eyes glistening as he stared at the gold coin stashed in the back. Jackpot. Holding open his satchel, he began to dump the coins into it as quietly as he could. Though with Dabi's obnoxious groaning, it drowned out any sound Hawks made.

"What is going on, Kamiji?" Enji's voice boomed out once more and the carriage shook as he stepped out, walking around the front.

"Uh oh," Hawks murmured. He prayed Enji wouldn't recognize his estranged son. He scooped up more coins, tossing them into the other large satchel, moving as quickly as he could, coins clanging against the ground.

"Sire, please! I think we just hit a man and-"

"No..." Enji growled, whipping his head back. "This is a trap!"

"Well," Hawks hummed, slinging the bag over his shoulder. "I guess the prince is smarter than he looks." He grinned and jumped up. "Time to go Dabi!" he called out, leaping back into the bushes.

On the ground, Dabi rolled back and kicked his legs up, dashing toward the forest before either Enji or Kamiji could react.

"Get back here!" Enji cried out, but Hawks simply took a bow.

"The people thank you greatly for your contribution, Todoroki Enji!" he smirked, tipping his hat in his direction as he and Dabi took off as fast as they could into the forest.

Even as Enji called after them, Hawks knew it was impossible for the man to catch up to them.



Hawks had always been a marvelously fast runner. He'd learned quickly as a young orphan boy when he needed to steal, he needed to be *fast*. And still, to this day, it was something everyone knew about him.

Hawks was impossible to catch because he was just too darn fast. He caused havoc for the rich, stealing their wealth to give back to the poor. The townspeople however, loved him for it. He was a hero.

Dabi had become his partner in crime when he had run from the horrible ways of his father. Everyone knew Prince Enji was a cruel man... greedy and selfish. Most things he did for his own gain. So Dabi had run. He threw away his old life, took up his current moniker, and joined Hawks in Sherwood Forest.

Stealing from Enji wasn't really a problem, especially since he hadn't recognized them, though Hawks was certain the prince was well aware of who he was. But he knew it could cause a problem for the folks of Nottingham.

If he could get this money to them quickly, maybe it would help.

"You're an idiot, you know that?" Hawks said, as he and Dabi trudged through the forest, carrying their goods.

"You got your gold, didn't you?" Dabi snorted.

"Yeah, but we stole from your father of all people!?" Hawks laughed.

"Of all people, the asshole probably deserves it the most," Dabi scoffed, kicking his foot against the ground.

"You're certainly not wrong there," Hawks muttered, glancing down. "I do hope that, uh..."

"Oh no. Don't you dare make this about her," Dabi hissed.

"What!?" Hawks gasped, pressing his hand to his chest as if he were offended. "I wasn't doing anything-"

Growling, Dabi thrust his finger in Hawks' face "Cut the crap, birdman. I know you, and you were about to get all worried about my sister!"

"Well, I do often wonder if she's okay, being trapped with your father and all," he shrugged, feigning innocence.

"You know she lives in a separate castle and that doesn't mean you go there," he snapped. "Stay away from her."

Hawks sighed, turning his head up toward the sky, swinging the large satchels



back and forth. "You know how hard that is for me? I know it's for the best and yet..."

"I should never have let you two meet," Dabi grumbled.

"Why?" Hawks asked, blinking as he turned to look at his friend. "Is she thinking about me too?!"

"You know I haven't been back there in years! How the hell would I know what Fuyumi is thinking about?!" he growled. "I hope it's not you."

"Probably not," Hawks sighed, kicking his foot against the ground.

"Don't get mokey," Dabi sneered. "You have a job to do." He shoved the other satchel towards Hawks and plopped down on the ground. "I'll wait here."

"Right, right," Hawks said, flicking the corner of his hat. Dabi never came into town with him, for fear of being recognized. Hawks was a master of trickery and disguise, and Dabi was far too lazy for that sort of thing. "I'll be back soon," he said, making his way toward the town.

It was hard not to let his mind wander when he walked by himself, and of course the only thing his brain could focus on was Todoroki Fuyumi.

She was the most beautiful woman Hawks had ever come across, and even that felt like it didn't put his feelings into words. Her eyes were a winter gray he wanted to float in, her smile melted whatever snow she seemed to have the power to make. Her powder white hair was decorated with red highlights that shone brighter than the warmest fire. Her voice was beautiful and gentle and her fingers were thin and precious, like she could make a flower bloom with just her touch.

Oh, he loved her.

Was it even fair to say that? He hadn't seen her in years, but they had grown up together. The fair maiden Fuyumi was most likely still as gorgeous and lovely as he remembered her. If only there was some way for him to see her, though he knew it was next to impossible. If he went anywhere *near* the castle, he would be arrested on site.

She was nobility and he was an outlaw. It was impossible for them to be together. But it didn't stop him from thinking about her. He hoped she wasn't tortured by their father like Dabi had been.

As he drew closer to the town, Hawks knew he had to focus. He had never been caught before, but Hawks was anything but sloppy. The sheriff, Bubaigawara Jin was an odd man, two-faced. One moment he was friendly and the next he was stealing every last bit of coin and claiming it was a tax for the prince.

Enji's greed had only grown worse when he ascended to the throne in place of King Toshinori. The man had gone off to fight in the war, leaving Enji, in charge.

With Toshinori, things had been good, and Enji had turned everything on its side.

It only made Hawks want to steal more, ready to give back to those who desperately needed it.

He stood in front of the door of a small hut and gently tapped on it.

"Who is it?" A dark voice called out from inside.

"Your uncle," he called back, putting on a strange, older sounding voice.

The door immediately swung open and he was met with small, red eyes. "Hawks?"

"Shh!" Hawks hissed and stepped inside the house, quickly shutting the door behind him.

"What are you doing-" The younger boy looked perplexed and Hawks supposed it had been quite a bit since he had seen the other.

"Heya Tokoyami," he chuckled, rubbing his neck. "Sorry to surprise you like this but I have a small gift for you."

"A gift?" Tokoyami muttered. "It's fine, you don't-"

"I want to," he smirked. "Besides, the prince giving back money every once and awhile is good for him."

Pulling out a small bag, Hawks dumped a few of the coins into Tokoyami's palms. "I know it's not much, I've been spreading it throughout town."

"It's fine, Hawks," Tokoyami said softly, staring at the money. "Anything given is generous."

"I don't have long, but how have you been? You've been taking care of yourself and your family?"

The teen nodded. "Mhm. It is dark and cold these days," he said, looking wistfully out the window. "Anything does help."

Hawks had assisted Tokoyami and his younger brother one morning when they had gone too deep into the woods. Hawks knew it was smarter to keep his distance but he had a soft spot for the dramatic teen.

"I know," Hawks sighed, leaning against the window. "I know Bubaigawara has been taking money from everyone so make sure you hide that."

"Yes," he nodded. "I will."

"Good," Hawks smiled. "If you ever need anything, you know where to find me. I'm here for you," he said, patting the boy's shoulder.

"Mmm, thank you," he muttered.

"Take care, okay?" Hawks said, leaving as quickly as he had come. He wished he could've stayed longer but he didn't want to risk causing any problems. The stoic

boy was often shy and a bit stubborn when it came to things like this, so Hawks was happy Tokoyami had accepted his gift.

Maybe things could be a little easier for him now.



Her father was mad. Maid Fuyumi was no stranger to bouts of her father's anger, but this was different. He had come to his secondary castle to express his anger. She rarely saw him in person nowadays.

"Do you take me to be a fool, Fuyumi?" he growled, pacing around the room. His large, angry steps echoed in the throne room.

"Of course not, Father," she said, bowing her head. "Admittedly, I'm not quite sure what it is you are so upset about."

"That *boy*," he boomed, stepping forward. His intense turquoise blue eyes stared at her. "I know you used to be friends with him. You and Touya both."

"Keigo," she whispered, turning her eyes toward the floor. She hadn't forgotten him. She could never forget him.

"Yes, *Keigo*," her father hissed. "He goes by Hawks now. A man for the people they said. He robbed me." There was so much spite in her father's voice and Fuyumi did not like the direction this was going in. "He must be arrested."

"Father, please, I don't think-"

"I am not here to listen to your opinion!" he snapped. "There will be an archery tournament this weekend, and you, my daughter, will be the prize. Your hand in marriage will be given to the winner."

Fuyumi's heart skipped a beat. The prize?! Of course, she had never expected her life to be her own. She was an upper-class maiden, her father, a prince, she was certain to be married off to some rich man of her father's choosing. Despite what her heart wanted and desired, she knew this was to be her fate.

But to be married off to a stranger, a winner of an archery tournament?! And what did this have to do with his anger towards Keigo?

"You wish to rest the fate of my marriage in the metaphorical hands of an archery tournament?" she asked, swallowing heavily. She couldn't cry in front of him, she knew it would end horribly.

"Of course not, you're bait."

He spoke so bluntly, it made her take a step back. "Bait?"

"Yes, for Hawks. I won't let him get away with this. He won't be able to resist a tournament where he could win you for a prize," her father smirked, sitting back

down on his throne. He looked rather pleased with himself, as if he had just devised his most ingenious plan.

Pursing her lips, Fuyumi frowned. "You... You don't know Keigo at all," she huffed, and turned on her heel before he could answer. Keigo wasn't that kind of man. At least, she wanted to believe he wasn't.

She rushed up the stairs, making her way back up to her room. She hadn't seen Keigo in years, but he had never left her mind, forever a presence in her heart. He was so free and wild, something she would never have the chance to be, not while her father sat on the throne.

Slamming the door shut behind her, she shoved a chair in front of it, a futile attempt at locking her father out. But perhaps, for a moment, she could have some privacy.

Reaching behind her head, Fuyumi took off the veil draped over her white and red hair and clutched it to her chest. She prayed Keigo wouldn't be a fool, but knowing him, he would come for her. He *always* said he would come for her.

It was one of the reasons she loved him.

Perhaps it wasn't fair to use such strong, passion filled words to describe her feelings for him, but she felt this way nonetheless. As young teenagers, Keigo had taken her and her brother on adventures. At the time, it felt as if they could've gone anywhere and conquered anything together. She never felt trapped by the confines of high society and the castle.

There were more private times too, when Keigo sneaked her out of the castle to dance under the moonlight together. Holding her veil to her chest, she spun in circles around her room. She remembered the light pressure of his hand against her back. The way they laughed and twirled together under only the light of the moon, the shadows of the trees hiding them from the rest of the world.

She had given him her first kiss one of those nights, his golden eyes drawing her toward him, his hand cupping her soft cheeks. Oh, it had been such a magical moment, fog pooling at their feet, the stars twinkling above their head while frogs and crickets chirped and created a symphony around them.

She hummed softly, remembering the moment, the rush of excitement she felt then. She had begged him not to leave, and he promised he would come back for her. He always did.

But her father had whisked her away after that. He'd banished Touya and hidden her and their younger brother Natsuo away from the world.

She hadn't seen Keigo since, and she missed him.

Oh, she missed him *so much*. Here, she felt trapped, locked away from the world, when Keigo had made her feel like every day was a new adventure.

Fuyumi let out a sigh, sitting on the small ledge by the window. She knew it would

be bad if Keigo went to the tournament, but nonetheless, there was a small part of her that wanted him to be there.

Maybe, just maybe, he could steal her away, and she could be free with him.



"You're an idiot," Dabi snorted, folding his arms over his chest.

"Ah, but see, you're an idiot too, since you're coming with me," Hawks smirked, gently jabbing Dabi in the chest with his thumb.

Dabi scoffed. "Look, I am going to come with you, to stop you from doing anything that might get you killed. You know my idiot father set this up on purpose, right?"

"No, really?" Hawks chuckled, rather obviously feigning ignorance.

"My father knows it was you that stole from him the other day. He knows you and Fuyumi have your... *thing*," he grumbled, wrinkling his nose. "This is an obvious trap."

"But this isn't an obvious disguise." Hawks smirked, placing the large hat over the wig. It was a dark wig, long flowing dark hair trailing down his back. He tied it into a long ponytail and put spectacles on his face. A fake beard covered his chin, much more facial hair than Dabi had ever seen on the other man. He had even trimmed down his eyebrows.

Dabi clicked his tongue.

"Do you really think I would get caught? Look at it this way, we can get your sister away from your father. Wouldn't you rather her be around me, than him," Hawks asked.

"Mmm," Dabi sighed, pulling the cloak over his head and wrapping a scarf across his face to hide his scars. "I don't exactly want her around *you* either."

Hawks trilled his lips. "Oh please, you know I'm the better choice."

"Let's go," Dabi growled, storming away from him.

Hawks knew this wasn't his most intelligent idea, but he was cocky enough to believe he would be able to get away with it. He was a talented archer, talented enough that he could make himself out to be less than perfect. Of course, he still wanted to win.

Fat Gum, the town friar, had come to them with the poster advertising the tournament. Prince Enji was anything but subtle, so it was quite obvious it was a ruse to get Hawks to come out. Since they had stolen from the prince, wanted posters had been popping up everywhere, and according to Fat Gum, Bubaigawara had been all over Nottingham, desperate for information on where to find the elusive Hawks.

Of course, Fat Gum had come to warn them, and Hawks was charging right into the middle of the trap.

He couldn't let Prince Enji get away with putting Fuyumi's life on the line. He would win the tournament and steal her away into the woods. He had always promised he would come for her.

When Hawks and Dabi made it to the edge of the woods, arriving to where the festival was taking place, Dabi nodded, heading off away from Hawks. They couldn't be seen together, and Dabi was probably going to cause his own ruckus. Quite frankly, Hawks didn't care what the man did, as long as he let him win Fuyumi's hand in marriage. Though Dabi often yelled at him about his sister, Hawks knew the burned man would be far happier knowing she was with Hawks than their father.

"C'mon Sheriff! I'm just as good of a shot as you are!" A shrill voice pierced Hawks' ears and turned his attention to the two people in front of him.

"I wish I could. Girls aren't allowed!" Bubaigawara Jin stood in front of him with his strange assistant, Himiko Toga.

"Jin!" she whined, draping over him. "I probably could beat you."

"I'm not denying that, but you can't," he stated.

Hawks tilted his head. What a contradictory statement. Twisting his lips, he stepped forward.

"Competing today, are you, Sheriff?" he asked, adjusting the quiver which sat upon his back.

Bubaigawara blinked, turning to face Hawks. Admittedly, he hadn't seen the man up close before. He hadn't known he had a large scar down the middle of his face, his messy blond hair tossed about every which way.

"Yes!" he said cheerily, but quickly frowned. "Who are you?"

"We've never seen you around here," Toga hummed, leaning in toward him.

"I'm a wanderer, just passing through. Name's Takami. I saw there was a tournament and thought it might be fun to give it a go," he shrugged. "I didn't realize someone as esteemed as yourself would be competing, Sheriff!" Hawks smirked, nudging against the taller man.

"Well, of course I am!" Bubaigawara replied, standing up tall. "I'm going to be the one to win."

"That so?" Hawks nodded. "I wouldn't be surprised."

"Besides, have you seen the prize?" Bubaigawara smirked, his cheeks flushing. "The prince's daughter is such a beauty. I wouldn't pass her up for nothin'. Though I wish we got money too."



Having never actually spoken to the sheriff, Hawks was starting to realize the man was a bit odd, constantly making statements that swung in opposite directions.

"Yeah, about the prize," he muttered. "Where is this woman?"

"Oh, yeah, she's right over there!" Bubaigawara said, gesturing toward the king's box.

Hawks turned his golden gaze to the thrones, his eyes immediately falling upon the woman he had longed to see. Her white and red hair was braided down, rogue pieces framing her face. Her glasses sat atop her nose and she had a flowing pink dress which pushed up her cleavage just enough to remind Hawks she was much older now than when they had shared their first kiss.

Hawks couldn't take his eyes off of her. It was like a ray of sun was shimmering down on her, like a spotlight. He didn't want or need to look at anything else.

"What a beauty," he breathed out, his voice hushed and whispered.

It looked like her father was talking to her. The big, hulking mass of a man sat next to her, looking intensely over the crowd as he spoke. Fuyumi's gaze faced forward, nodding her head every so often. She didn't look happy.

Not that Hawks was surprised. Her father had made her into a prize to be won. He couldn't imagine anyone being happy about that.

"If you'll excuse me, Sheriff," Hawks said, cutting off the man's strange ramblings. Bubaigawara had been talking and Hawks had been doing anything but listening.

"See you on the field! Can't wait to beat you," Bubaigawara called out after him and Hawks waved, keeping his focus.

Getting close to her and the prince probably wasn't smart, especially given the fact that this whole tournament was just a set up to capture him. Still, Hawks wanted to see her, and get close.

He wanted her to know he had come for her.

The closer he got to her, the faster he approached. He desired nothing more than to reach forward, take her hand and pull her away from this box, away from her father and into the forest. She would be safe there, and hopefully happier.

"Hello, fair young maiden," he said, bowing in front of the box. "I hear it is you we will be competing for today."

Fuyumi froze, her lips curling into a frown. "Well-" She began to speak, but stopped when Hawks raised his eyes toward her. Nothing could hide his golden gaze, and he hoped she would recognize him.

Her light gray eyes flickered with recognition, her brow raising. "Oh, I... I suppose you are and I-" she said, about to say more.

However, the prince frowned, immediately noticing when his daughter spoke up.

"And who might you be?!" he said, interrupting her.

"Ah! Sorry your highness," Hawks said, bowing to him as well. "I thought it would be polite to address the lady. The name's Takami, I'm a wanderer and I couldn't resist entering your little tournament."

"Little..." the prince scoffed. Of course he had chosen to focus on that word. "May the best man win. I only will allow *the best* for my daughter."

Hawks resisted the urge to roll his eyes and he stepped forward, taking Fuyumi's hand in his own. Her fingers were cold, a feeling he remembered quite well from all the evenings they had danced together. They were so thin and dainty, like he could snap her hand in two if he squeezed too hard. Brushing his thumb over her skin, he raised her hand to his lips, pecking her gently.

"What a gentleman," she whispered.

He winked, pulling away.

"Indeed," the prince hummed, narrowing his eyes in Hawks' direction.

"I'll be rooting for you then," Fuyumi said softly, gently smoothing out the top of her dress.

Hawks nodded, bowing once more before making his way back to the festival. His heart throbbed in his chest, the feeling painful and intense. He *had* to win. He couldn't lose her, not again.

As he made his way through some of the booths of carnival games and food, he wondered where Dabi was. It was good he hadn't seen him, honestly.

His eyes scanned the crowd when he happened upon Tokoyami, the teen wearing a large cloak. It looked hot, like he could've died from overheating in the thing. Hawks smirked, and strolled down toward the booth.

"You know, cloaks like that are meant to be worn in the winter," Hawks smirked, raising an eyebrow at the kid.

"Eh-" he turned around slowly, obviously surprised someone had spoken to him. He looked Hawks up and down, until his eyes widened. "H-Haw-" he began to say but Hawks quickly covered his mouth, pulling him away from the booth.

He moved around the side of a tent and pulled Tokoyami with him, hiding away from the crowds of people walking around the faire. "Shhh," he hushed. "No one can know I'm here."

"Why *are* you here?" Tokoyami asked. "It doesn't seem like a good idea." The kid always was a bit blunt.

Hawks sighed, rubbing his forehead. "I'm here to rescue the lady."

"Maid Fuyumi?" he asked, tilting his head.

"Yes," Hawks nodded.

“Ah.”

Hawks sighed. “I didn’t realize the sheriff was going to be competing. I’m hoping if I beat him, he’ll leave the town alone too.”

Tokoyami turned away from Hawks, his gaze turning to the ground. “I doubt that will stop him. But Hawks, please be careful,” he urged.

Nodding, Hawks watched as people walked by, completely unaware of their conversation. “I will be. You don’t have to worry about me kid, just enjoy the show.”

The look on Tokoyami’s face told Hawks that the kid wasn’t about to stop worrying, but hopefully Hawks would prove him wrong.

“Hear ye, hear ye! The archery tournament is about to begin! All contestants make their way to the target range!” The loud megaphone echoed through the faire, the messenger calling out a few times.

Hawks nodded to Tokoyami, leaving the boy behind as he made his way over to the field. He hoped Tokoyami would watch and not worry about anything.

There were about ten competitors, all of them standing in front of their designated target. Hawks, was of course, placed next to Bubaigawara. Unsurprising, as his luck today had been a bit strange. His disguise was good, but Tokoyami had recognized him, and unfortunately, Enji had seemed suspicious when he spoke with Fuyumi. That had been his own damn fault.

The announcer explained they would be shooting the targets three times. The two people closest would make the top two and the target would move farther away. After three more shots, they would determine the winner.

It was an easy competition. Though Hawks had originally wanted to hold himself back, upon seeing Fuyumi, there was no way he was going to risk even potentially ruining this.

He drew back his first arrow and the announcer began to count down, all of the competitors shooting at the same time. Hawks let his arrow fly, a perfect bullseye, landing right in the middle of the target.

“Woah, stranger!” Bubaigawara, whose arrow was the second closest, landing in the corner of the bullseyes, glanced at Hawks. “You’re pretty good at this. Though it was probably a lucky shot.”

“Guess you’ll have to wait and see.”

The second shots fired and Hawks landed his arrow right next to his first. His third landed just above the other two.

There was a pause as the judges walked down the field looking at the various targets. It was absolutely no surprise when Hawks and the sheriff were announced as the two finalists. Over in the box, Hawks noticed Fuyumi clapping, a smile on her face. Perhaps she was as excited as he was.

"Good shooting," Hawks smirked, looking at Bubaigawara's arrows.

"Thanks, you too. But let's see if you can keep it up in the final," the sheriff huffed, watching as the others made their way off of the field. The targets were pushed back, and Hawks set himself up for the next position.

"Get ready for the final round," the announcer called out. "Aim!" Hawks raised up his arrow, keeping his eye on the target. He tilted the bow upward, knowing he could still angle it for a more impressive bullseye. "And... fire!"

This time, they both shot, but Hawks' arrow flew upward.

"Heh. Nice try. Too bad you missed." Bubaigawara hummed, stroking the end of one of his arrows.

"Did I?" Hawks asked, watching as the arrow arched perfect, landing directly on the bullseye of his target.

Bubaigawara's mouth hung open. "Whatever," he grumbled. He glanced towards his own arrow, which had just barely touched the edge of the center.

The both aimed their arrows, readying for the next shot. Hawks brought his bow up, but stumbled forward when Bubaigawara leaned to side, shooting his arrow before Hawks could. He tried to catch himself, and spun in a circle, the black hair from the wig hitting against his back. He tilted the bow and shot, the arrow zipping past the air and into the target.

"How..." Bubaigawara muttered, narrowing his eyes. "You're cheatin'?!"

"Me?" Hawks asked, clicking his tongue. "I wouldn't accuse *me* of that if I were you, Sheriff," he hissed. "How about we make a little bet?"

"A bet! No. I don't bet," the sheriff said. Hawks gently tapped his arrow against his bow, shrugging. "Fine! Okay."

"If I win this, you leave Nottingham alone."

"Nottingham, if you're not from here then why-"

"Do we have a deal?" Hawks asked, cutting him off.

"Fine. I guess," Bubaigawara snorted.

Aiming his final arrow, he shot it before Bubaigawara could finish. It landed directly in the center, splitting through one of his other arrows, right down the middle.

Bubaigawara's last arrow flew quickly after Hawks' but it wasn't enough to be as impressive.

"It's my win," Hawks smirked. "So stay away from my town."

"Wha- No! Who are-"

"And the winner is... Takami!" The announcer called out. The crowd cheered, most

of the people from Nottingham were happy to see the sheriff lose. Hawks knew if they actually realized who he was, they most likely would've cheered even louder.

But none of that mattered to him.

He had won the prize he wanted more than anything else.

Music played, the crowd cheering as Hawks made his way through the faire over to Fuyumi and the prince's box. Fuyumi stood, clapping as he walked closer. She had a large smile on her face, and he couldn't wait to whisk her away from her horrible father.

Standing in front of her, he bowed. "My lady."

"My good sir," she said, curtsying.

"Takami, was it?" the prince said, stepping forward.

"Yes, and I--"

"Ah. You must understand, I can't simply marry my daughter off to anyone--"

"Father--" she began to say, but he held up his hand, cutting her off.

"I do understand--"

"Exactly. You see," he continued, stepping forward in front of Hawks. "I can't allow her to marry some petty outlaw--"

Lunging forward, the prince yanked Hawks' wig off, letting the dark hair fall to the ground.

"I knew it," Enji growled. "Seize him!"

"No!" Fuyumi yelled, but the prince blocked her from moving.

"I thought you were far too relaxed about being married off," Enji snapped. "You knew it was him."

"No, I--"

Hawks prided himself on being fast, it was one of the things that made him such a good thief, but even he wasn't fast enough to run from the guards who swarmed him, cuffing his hands. He struggled, but it wasn't enough to get free from the restraints.

"You really thought you could show up here today and trick me. Did you really think I would let you kidnap my daughter?" Enji scoffed.

"I wouldn't call it a kidnapping, exactly," Fuyumi muttered, her cheeks flushed.

The prince ignored her, making his way down the steps to get closer. "Hawks you are a foolish man, and as an outlaw of the crown, you must be punished. Therefore, I sentence you to immediate death."

"No! Father, please!" Fuyumi said. She pushed past the guards, stepping in front of the prince, she pressed herself to Hawks' chest.

"Fuyumi-" he whispered. Though his plan hadn't quite gone as he imagined, Hawks couldn't be upset having her so close to him. He wished he could get free and wrap his arms around her.

"I love him," she breathed out, and Hawks froze. Was it true? Or was she just saying that to help him go free?

"Enough!" the prince boomed.

"Yeah, I think we've all had enough," A new voice came from behind the box, a cloaked figure stepping around to the front. He held a large torch in his hand, the fire flickering dangerously close to him. Though his face was mostly covered, Hawks recognized that look.

"Dabi," Hawks smirked.

"Who the hell are you?" Enji yelled, his attention now focused on the new man.

Slowly, he peeled back the cloak, uncovering his face. "Good to see you again, Dad," Dabi laughed. "But actually we're here for Fuyumi."

"Touya," she breathed.

"Close enough," Dabi snorted, clicking his tongue as he tossed the flaming torch onto the box, the curtains immediately catching on fire.

The prince's eyes widened. "Touya!? Are you insane?!"

"Not anymore than you!" he laughed.

The blaze immediately began to spread across the box and the guards scattered, running away from the raging fire.

"I banished you, Touya," Enji hissed.

"Yeah, from the castle. I'd say I'm allowed to be here," he shrugged.

"What have you done?" Enji boomed. "How dare you ruin this!"

"That's my job," Dabi said, sighing casually as he watched the fire spread to the ground, burning pieces of hay and grass. "As much as I hope this would kill you, it won't. So, until next time, Dad."

"Touya!" With a growl, the prince moved away from the flame, watching as Dabi disappeared behind the wall of fire.

Fuyumi's eyes darted back and forth, but immediately shoved the guard still holding Hawks. Her father was obviously distracted by Dabi, so she wasn't going to waste any time getting Hawks free. She grabbed the keys from the ground and fumbled quickly, unhooking his cuffs.



With a sigh, Hawks rubbed his wrists, immediately cupping Fuyumi's face to pull her in for a kiss. "You love me?"

"Keigo! This is hardly the time!" she yelped.

"Ah, I guess you're right," he chuckled and wrapped their fingers together. "Will you come with me though?"

"Of course! Do you think I want to stay here?"

Hawks flicked his gaze towards her father and the rapidly spreading fire. "I highly doubt that." He tugged on her hand and pulled her into the chaos of the townsfolk running away. He didn't listen when Enji called out after them, the man torn between chasing after his horrible son, or going after his now runaway daughter.

"C'mon," Hawks said, tugging her through the crowd. "Let's get out of here and back into the woods."

As people scurried around them, neither of them looked back, running back into cover of the woods, Hawks' safe haven.



Dabi was already back at the camp when Hawks arrived with Fuyumi.

"Touya," she panted, rushing to him as she pulled him into a hug.

"Ow--"

"Did you get burned?! Are you okay?! Have you been with Keigo this whole time?!" She rushed through question after question.

"Ugh," Dabi sighed. "I'm fine, 'Yumi. Calm down. Yes, I've been with him the whole time and you can thank him because his stupid ass couldn't stop thinking about you and wanting to rescue you from Dad. The tournament was just... a good excuse. I wanted to come back for you, but this whole thing was his idea," he muttered, clicking his tongue in frustration.

"Keigo," she whispered, peering over her shoulder at him. She quickly turned back to her brother, pressing her teeth into her lip. "Are you sure you're okay?"

"I'm fine." Dabi rolled his eyes, and flicked his hand toward Hawks. "You two should... go talk or whatever. Otherwise he's going to keep looking at you like some sick, little bird."

"Are you sure?" she asked again, her eyes flickering with excitement.

"Yes, go. But don't try anything weird, Hawks!" he snapped. "I'll murder you."

"Don't worry, don't worry," he said. "The last thing I would do is hurt her."

"Ugh. Just go be gross somewhere else," he snorted, waving them both away.

Hawks extended his hand to Fuyumi who was quick to take it. He led her deeper into the woods, away from everyone around them. He especially loved these summer evenings where fireflies lit up the woodland clearings, the brooks babbled gently and the sweet sound of crickets filled the night air.

Oftentimes he would come here and watch the stars. It was peaceful, and reminded him the world wasn't always an ugly place. People could be mean to one another, but there were pockets of nature that were pure and beautiful to look at it.

And now, it was even better with Fuyumi.

The moonlight glistened against her smooth, pale skin. Her white and red hair sparkled in the gentle lighting. It reminded him of all the times they danced together as teenagers.

He turned to her when they stood in the clearing by the small river. "Could I interest the lady in a dance?" he asked, bowing to her as he held out his hand.

"Of course!" she giggled, curtsying to him. "I would love to dance. It's been awhile."

"It has," he whispered, and pulled her close. He kept his hand wrapped around hers and slid his other hand down her lower back, swaying with her. "I've missed you."

"Me too," she said. "I kept wondering when you would come back for me."

"I didn't know where you were. Even when I found your brother, we didn't know where your father had moved you," he said. "You know I would've come immediately."

She rested her head against his shoulder and nodded. "I know you would have."

The two of them swayed back and forth, him keeping her close. He never wanted to leave this moment and he would never let her go. It was a little hard to believe she was actually here. He kept expecting to look up and see her figure disappear into the shadows of the forest. But no, she was here. She was real. He had lost her, and now she was his, and he was hers. He would do anything to keep her safe.

"I meant what I said earlier," she muttered. "That I... I love you."

He stopped moving and slowly pulled back, wrapping his hands around her shoulders. "Fuyumi... I love you too," he said. He lifted his hands to her cheeks and cupped her face. "I've been waiting to tell you that for so long and for a while I wondered if I was crazy, for thinking about you after all this time."

"No, you're not crazy," she said. "If you are, then I am too. I kept wondering when I would stop thinking about you, but I never could. You were always on my mind and I just knew... I mean, I had this feeling we would find each other again."

"There wasn't a day that went by that I didn't think of you," he breathed, brushing his thumbs over her cheeks. "I couldn't forget you either. When I found your

brother, I spoke of you non-stop. He wanted to murder me.”

Giggling, she leaned into his touch. “I’m sure. But now, we never have to be apart again.”

“I will never let you out of my sight,” he said softly. “But... are you sure you’re okay with staying here in the forest? I am an outlaw. In fact, I’m probably even more of one now.”

She smiled, bringing her lips to meet his. Under the moonlight, they kissed, their lips feeling familiar as memories from years past came rushing back. He pulled her close, brushing his thumbs over her jaw as he deepened the kiss, never wanting to stop. Her lips were so sweet, and his were rough, but they fit together like pieces of a puzzle that had been missing for years.

Pulling back, he stared into her soft gray eyes, his golden ones shimmering in the moonlight. “Then, I guess I’ll be an outlaw too,” she said softly.

“There’s no one else I’d rather be banished with,” he whispered, and kissed her again and again, forgetting themselves until the morning.



It was a few days later when Fat Gum brought them the news. King Toshinori had gotten word of the absurd tournament and the fire. He was on his way home to put a stop to how Prince Enji had decided to rule the country.

He had already decided Enji would be put in prison, along with Bubaigawara and many of the other tyrannical sheriffs Enji had placed around the various villages to overtax the citizens. Tokoyami and the other villagers could live in peace.

“Guess that means you won’t be an outlaw anymore,” Fuyumi giggled, leaning her head against Hawks’ shoulder while the two watched the fire flickering in front of them.

“Maybe we could get a house? A little place in town,” he suggested.

“Maybe. I don’t know. I wouldn’t mind staying here in the forest,” she said. “It’s different; an adventure.”

“Really?” Hawks smirked. “I don’t really care where we live. As long as you’re happy.”

“Well good,” she whispered, looking up at him. She brought their lips together for a soft kiss. “Because wherever we are, as long as we’re together, I can promise I’ll be happy.”

He chuckled, moving his arm to drape over her waist, pulling her lips to meet his one more time. “I guess you’re stuck with me forever.”

She smiled, staring into his perfect golden eyes. “Good. That’s just where I want to be.”











Millienery



# Kiss the Boy

A *Little Mermaid* AU by Jade

So here Todoroki Shouto is, at the mouth of the cavern where Father reigns, asking him for permission to leave. A leave of duty so that he could explore the land. He will allow the palace to follow forth, even to extract him back into the ocean.

Father, unsurprisingly, was not very pleased with this proposition. Even if all of his children lobbied for it, even subdued Fuyumi.

There had not been a queen on the throne of the Atlantic Ocean for decades. Shouto, heir apparent, is without interest to ascend complacently nor take a mate to his side. Endeavour is jittery, billowing steam in court when ministers press for a more stable court, a second regent over the domain. It's blasphemy. How dare these lowly courtesans suggest to the regent how his kingdom ought to be run?

"What would you even do on land?" Father demands. "Your domain is within the ocean, Shouto. Such is the purpose of your birth."

Fuyumi and Natsuo shift closer to him, despite the simmering heat surrounding their youngest brother. Father is rather fond of reminding his offspring at how their existence serves a purpose—continuing a dynasty, the Todoroki line—and nothing else. In the water, Endeavour is the indisputable best. His focus in life is single-minded and spearheaded. Shouto's rebellious fits are incomprehensible to Father.

"I've always been good. To your wishes. To the kingdom." He states, visibly keeping the heat around him to a lukewarm level. "Will you not allow your heir this one whim?"

Father scoffs, eyes hard and blue. "And what good would this—" A pale lip curls, derisive. Shouto's fist shakes by his side. "*Adventuring* be for our kingdom? And why must *you* partake in this dilly dallying?"

Shouto breathes in. Tastes and breathes the saltwater that is as natural to him as the fins on his tail, the gills on his neck. Breathes out—a gush of saltwater, back into the ocean.

"A week." Shouto bargains. "I only ask for a week, to not be your heir, to not be anyone of significance, but to roam around on foreign land. The sea is my home, Father, but I wish to see the land before I am chained to it to be its ruler. There is no purpose except freedom."

The court is still, stilted by his direct insult to the king, though he is not by any means wrong.

Father leans towards him, toward a fate decided. Shouto matches the dead blue stare, thinks of Mother and eyes like a sheet of kelp reaching for sunlight striking beyond the air.

"A week." King Enji sneers, teeth all sharp and terrible like a shark. "You shall have a week to squander your responsibilities. Then you will return, *promptly*, to resume your ascension to the throne and you be, as you said, 'chained' to this throne that is your birthright, heir of mine."

He is no longer a 'son' —only 'heir', had always been 'heir'.

"So soon, Father?" Fuyumi speaks, soft and measured. Rejected as a defective heir long ago, she still serves as counsel to her brothers and court ministers, and at this present moment, she is an eyesore in Father's eyes.

"I dictate when events in *my* kingdom can happen," He spits. "*Child.*"

"Even with Brother roaming about, lost?" Natsuo questions next, less cowed by the billowing steam that their Father lets loose.

"You have only one brother, foolish son of mine!" thunders the King. "I have passed my judgements upon this foolhardy request of yours, my heir. Pass my sight before I revise my thinking on your whims."

Natsuo seems ready to start another row with Father, but Shouto thinks this is as good as it gets. He tugs him away and swims out of the court, beyond the imperial gardens, the intricate, cold stone structures carved by force of steam, and past the palace grounds, to their shared haven, their hands wound tight with one another.

"A week." Natsuo bitterly beats his tail against the cave wall. "It's not enough to do anything."

"I'm surprised he hadn't pitched me headfirst into a live volcano mouth when I suggested it." Shouto shrugs, inspecting the long pointy thing that had fallen from the drowning human the other day. A blade, it looks to be. Ornate. Carved by a skilled workman.

"He wouldn't harm his heir so recklessly," His brother scoffs. "Not when Brother is still flapping about, doing whatever. That's a danger to the throne. He can't have you harmed."

Shouto wrings his hands, coolness and warmth overlapping. "Denki is going to tail me. Insistently. I hear there is an inlet that feeds into the ocean where I'm headed towards. You both can check up on me while I'm on land. It's not... entirely a lonesome endeavour."

Natsuo groans, covering his gills. "Don't say that word."

Fuyumi giggles when Shouto bites back a smile. "Sorry, Natsuo."

"You're *not* sorry, which is why you did it, you lil' brat. Come back here, let's see if you've still got a mouth on you when I catch you—Fuyumi, let me at him, *let me at him!*"

All lost things come to rest in the ocean, Mother told him, long ago.

It's why he shows her the flotsam he grazed when he dared to swim close to the surface, refusing to meet air. It's why they can chat, making up senseless tales about what sink to their domain, objects indestructible and so easily destroyed, all of them making the ocean floor their final resting place.

It is pitch darkness where Mother is confined to, but her eyes are grey orbs of light. She knows this prison more than any palaces that Father might have paraded her in. Shouto's eye —hers, his, *theirs* —glows a pale silver, when he dives, deeper and colder, to visit her.

"Mother," He calls out before the mouth of her barren cave. "It's me, Shouto."

Mother is not the familiar shape greeting him. Something slim, deliquescent, more water than form.

"Brother." It croaks, voice like chafing rocks and shifting tectonic plates.

Shouto's grip on the dagger almost slips, but he holds tight. The shape swims closer. Touya's gaunt face and dimly lit eyes, dark blue and grey, peering out from the cloak he dons.

"Brother" he says, before swimming closer. "*Touya.*"



King Enji's decision to let his heir disappear, seemingly unchecked, had dissipated to all edges of the ocean, alerting the vagabond oldest Todoroki to check up on his brother. Wayward, unprecedented, and uncontrollable, King Enji declared Prince Touya as good as dead many years ago when Shouto was just a small fry. He is the reason why magic had been largely restricted to only royal use, though Shouto is adamant on *not* using Father's brand of fire magic, something unnatural about flames bursting in water that can extinguish them. Touya's fire had never hurt, not like Father's had, warming up Shouto's claws and fins as they clutch onto one another, Mother floating between them.

"You are to leave the ocean?" His brother asks.

"Not indefinitely, and not without Father's conditions, but yes, I was granted leave." His brother's hands are marred with scars, twisted and mangled from battle, training, and leading a life outside of a royal palace.

"What are his conditions?"

They cannot see his face, not too clearly anyways, but they know he is grimacing.

"No talks concerning the ocean. No reveal of my birth. Daily reports to the palace messenger Father sends to land. Return seven days henceforth and ascend immediately to the throne."

He too, cannot see their faces too clearly, but they are each other's, so the glimpses Shouto had of his brother and mother tell him plenty of their exact opinions on this endeavour—disdain.

"We are aware that you are reticent, my dear." Rei speaks, a gnarled, burnt hand reaching out towards him. He clutches onto the webbed talons eagerly, cooling ice against his heating face.

"Mother," Touya sighs. "There's really no danger of Shouto revealing our existence to anyone of importance."

"You're going to jinx it," Shouto murmurs, lulled into a daze.

"Reticence or not, it's quite exorbitant, the king's terms." Mother firmly concludes.

"You're telling me." Touya mutters, easing down his hood. There's no one in the royal family that has not suffered burns dealt from the hands of the ruling regent. Touya's scarred face, neck, hands have all been healed, but the tissues are hard as dried kelp, gnarled and twisted like a sponge freshly sprouted.

"You are not to speak." Rei murmurs, another hand weaving in his lock of sea-smoothed locks. "But it does not mean you cannot communicate in other ways that matter. To this, you shall be able to speak with heart."

Her fingers gnarled skin, eyes growing a distinct white, hair luminescent platinum. Touya is closer, webbed hands reaching out to him.

"Father's terms will not affect you when you speak to a like-minded heart, who sees not with eyes but with their soul. To this, you shall know, in your heart of hearts, who is worth bestowing your heart unto."

The magic glows pale blue —not angry orange and red like Father's —Touya had tampered down his temper when dealing with his siblings, gentility from Mother flowing in his magic. Mother's blessing is a comforting silver, coiled around him, into his veins, wrapped around his skin.

"You'll be alright, baby brother." Touya tells him when they exchange a lingering embrace with Mother before swimming off.

"Your blessings—you two sound like you know something," Shouto frowns, arms pushing himself up further until the tip of his nose grazes the separation between sky and sea.

"Let's just say," Touya slips back his hood, eyes an amused azure, bluer than the water around them. "A little bird told me about a storm and a shipwreck."



Denki is with profound tears and apprehension that Shouto would either be filleted alive on land or worse, filleted alive *without* him there.

"Can't I come with you?" The electric eel wheedles, wrapped very tightly and stub-

bornly around his wrist. Momo had attempted to dislodge him to no avail. Fuyumi had to stop her from persisting. Denki had seemed very keen to discharge sparks.

"Not when Father can see you." Shouto murmurs to his beloved friend, before extracting himself away. "I'll be back within a week. You need not worry."

Denki, understanding too well that the kelp and water are all the king's subjects and answerable to him only. The plight of the heir holds no bars to them spilling everything to their king. It does not bar him from launching from a sombre musical number by his prince's side, crooning mournfully to his composition of *Under the sea*, to Momo's dutiful percussion accompaniment.

"Be safe, my prince." Denki winds tight around Shouto's webbed hand, eyes bright and electric current flitting through his scales.

"We'll see you in a week, Shouto." Momo whispers to him, as they see him off, the gale and force of Inasa's magic picking up remotely. "Inasa will see to your needs."

"Present!" The boisterous tiger shark deity emerges, seemingly from wind and storm, crushing them all into a hug. "The prince is in good hands."

Denki groans, squished very tightly and uncomfortably under Inasa's furs. "At this rate, he'll die *before* he reaches land."

"Kaminari, my friend, I can very well hear you! I must say, your confidence is disheartening. Nonetheless, I shall deliver the prince to the best of my abilities! We must away, my Prince!"



At the surface, to the outcrops of rocks, Inasa's eyes burn an amused green as Shouto struggles with the extra appendage, hacking out familiar seawater. Perhaps, land dwelling is not that wise of an endeavour.

"Inasa," he says, as he finally sights land. The massive tail by his side nudges into his kicking legs.

*Your highness*, he hears. It sounds amused, even if Shouto can't hear very well outside of water.

"Tell nobody of today, will you?" He asks, though it is in vain.

*Of course not, my prince*, Inasa promises, insincere, gleeful, and Shouto taps his fin, a little irritated.

"Oh, and!" He shouts, hacking up water as his feet graze sand. It's too shallow to accommodate Inasa's bulk of a form, and he waves his friend away, rolling his eyes fondly at the agitated twitch. "Did you brew that storm, Inasa? The one that sank a human royal vessel?"

*I've been busy in my domain, my lord. I know of no vessel.*

Then Touya has something to do with that.

"No matter. Be off now, Inasa. Tell everyone I am well."

*I will see you at the coronation ceremony, your highness,* the fin dips in a gesture of a bow, before his friend disappears, wind unto sea.



Shouto had not thought this out very well.

There are no needs for apparel in the ocean —it's *wet*, and nudity is somewhat a display of pride in a lot of clans. However, humans invented the concept of clothing, and therefore that makes Shouto's... nakedness an issue. An uncomfortable issue, one that is stared at insistently by the human children crowding the shore, a little girl running away.

He ought to have asked for magical clothing or perhaps a cloak, but those items are hugely inconceivable to his world—he himself only learned of this knowledge when he was sneaking off to swim close to the surface, observing the humans. Keigo was too happy to regale him with tales from the human realm.

The little girl returns, clutching tightly to a tall human, whose eyes widen at Shouto's curled form. Immediately, he swipes off the cloak on his shoulder, lowering himself as he nears Shouto, eyes big and round as he offers the garment, hand still held by the little girl.

The man murmurs some comforting sounds as Shouto accepts the garment, wrapping it around his shoulder. It's a warm thing, almost like an embrace.

Big eyes watch him, curious and concerned, and when Shouto lifts his face to his, the splatters of dots across his cheeks and nose shift as the human bares his teeth. Shouto blinks, and stares back. Should he respond with teeth of his own? He is intruding on a foreign space, and it is only just that an occupant declares dominance to the place he dwells, but how awfully early it is to ask for submission. Shouto does not wish for conflict he only wishes for freedom, to roam aimlessly, to sleep under the stars.

So he bows his head, submits to the threat.

The little girl babbles tearfully at the tall man, who flushes and pales, one to another, back and forth, as Shouto continues to submit. He cannot understand their tongues—not yet. The magic takes a while to register, and he startles when the man offers a large palm, right before his eyes.

"I apologise for startling you," The stranger murmurs, soft as moss. He is like a moss sprung to life. "Are you hurt anywhere?"

Shouto clutches the cloak, tight, warm, and moves his head, one side, then other. *This means no*, Keigo had told him.



"Do you know where you are?" The question continues, still smooth and comforting. Another shake of the head.

"Would you like to come with me back to my home? We have physicians who can tend to you, and we can look after you."

The palm remains, resolute and giving. Shouto knows of generosity, but he also knows of danger among strangers. These are people, *human* people, a completely different species to his. Even if he follows them, their physicians will not be able to inspect him, and who is to say what will happen next?

Besides, kindness begets kindness. He has nothing to offer the kindness proposed, and he's not keen on being indebted to a human man with eyes and hair of moss. The manner in which he conducted himself is comforting, coaxing a wild animal to nibble from his palm, but Shouto has had a lifetime of danger, so he wishes to only drift aimlessly from here on.

"You need not answer." The palm retreats and the human's lips curve, like a swinging moon disc, on his face. Shouto notices that there are no teeth bared. It's almost a friendly gesture, inviting ease, and he retracts his ice magic, flakes embedding themselves to sand grains along the beach.

"Brother, you're scaring him." The little girl whispers, though not as soft as she perhaps intended. "He's shivering."

"Oh dear." Eyes of rich, vibrant kelp shift into a concerned light, a scarred hand reaching out to his shoulder, and Shouto watches mutely, as something like a memory strikes him between his eyes.

A ship, marooned in the deep sea. Struck by heavenly —or ocean —lightning and wind, storm brewing and waves swallowing. Sinking trinkets, then sinking bodies. Shouto had tried to rescue as many as he could, but there were too many, falling and falling.

There was one, hair muted like land-dragged kelp, and it was in the hubbub of everything that Shouto had not glimpsed a closer look. But as he was dragging and swimming and flinging humans onto shore, hands with crisscrossing scars held tight onto his neck, even as his gills cut into skin.

But the fingers only hover —warm, so warm—by his ears. That kind face worries, teeth pulling at lips, and Shouto only sits still, waiting for... something.

"We live at the top of the hill, my family and I." The human draws back, the girl moving with him. "Just as for Izuku at the gate and I will be there. Seek us out if you need us, alright?"

That's it? No coercion? Simply an open invitation?

"Bye-bye, red white friend." The girl waves to him as the human man hefts her up and carries her away, easily, small fry as she is, and disappears just as swiftly as he came, over the sandy dunes.

Shouto tips up his head, looks to the top of a hill, and sees the booming castle. Ah. That can't be... it?

There are no other residences. Just the castle. That... is it.

He needs to locate Keigo, reconvene and strategise.



"Oh, I think you should say yes," Keigo tells him before aggressively dressing him. "I know that family. They won't cause harm to you."

Shouto stares at him, worry marring his brow. It is true that Keigo knows a whole lot more than he does about land, but it is a little irresponsible to just simply pass him onto a human family when he is here, perfectly capable of keeping an eye out for Shouto.

"Your Highness." The wind god grins, roguish and sharp, as he inspects a blood-red feather. "I'm only here to equip you with the bare necessities so that you *don't* die on land, but I'm off to complete my assignment in the arctic circle right after. I cannot keep an eye out for you, I barely look after Tsukuyomi, and he's my ward."

Indeed, it is already too burdensome that Keigo had to track him down bodily from this faraway cottage and march him back. Now, clothed and charmed to look not so out of place, Shouto is free to leave once again, the winged man perching on the windowsill and looking out into the wide sky.

It's already so much kindness. He makes a note to inform his brother later, so their sordid alliances can become less sordid.

*Thank you, Keigo,* he dips his head. A hand worms itself into his hair, messing it up. *Have a safe journey.*

"I'm untouchable, your highness." the god tosses him a careless grin, a foot and a wing out the window. "You take care too, Prince Shouto. Trust the Yagi clan and their friends. They will not harm you."

Shouto keeps his head bowed until the god takes off into the clouds, then he proceeds to walk around with his new legs, covered with the footwear of 'boots'. How odd. These humans have clothing for every part of their person.

The Takami residence is close to the small seaside market, with vibrant merchants and consumers partaking in trade. Shouto totters into the street, into the market, into the town square. He takes in the sights and sounds, engaging in purchases even a few times with the allowances he was given by father, delivered by Keigo in a pouch. With no voice, he simply points, nods, hands over the copper coins, but it is fulfilling no less of an experience. He had not yet ventured to the fields and remained for long, but he plans to, once his legs no longer tire of long journeys.

Shouto attempts to study the literature and tongues of these people, these seafarers—so close yet so far removed from the ocean. He sees the children playing in the

water, the fishers who reel in batches of fishes, but they only live at the fringe of the ocean, just as he now lingers on the fringe of theirs, neither wandering in too far.

On the third day, Shouto walks aimlessly, happily seizing his teeth around a meat morsel, meandering aimlessly, as he had wished. Moving a little further away from the fringes of the ocean today, not that he is fleeing from father's messengers, oh no—but to walk whimsically, almost childlike in his wonderment of a new land, not worrying.

That is, until the boulders shift and the grass part, dragging him into them.

Shouto's skin immediately freezes, ice and snow atop water, when a finger curls before red lips, shushing him intently.

A search party sweeps through the grassland, frantic sounds of people searching for something.

His eye flicks over to his captor.

Not something. *Someone* is being pursued.

The search party rampages through the grassland, does not see the two boys sitting like two beacons amidst plain grass, then departs down into town. Shouto had been using magic to cloak himself, give his face, eyes, hair the unassuming mask of an ordinary mortal, but this escapee *also* wears magic like a comfortable cloak, humming under his skin as he grins at Shouto. This is a magic familiar to him. He had sensed it before, felt it like a kindness unfelt in the freezing ice of the ocean floor.

Wave-smoothed moss. Warm skin. Shifting dots on cheeks, under eyes, on a ridge of a crooked nose. Roaring of blood in his ears, to the churning storm outside. Endless scars.

Even if Shouto had the power of speech, he wouldn't have been able to articulate as effectively as his wide-eyed *you, again*, to the stranger. Izuku, of the Midoriya Clan.

"Wait." Midoriya Izuku stops crouching, magic sliding off him, green standing out amidst all the swaying grass. Shouto's own magic also flutters and weans off, leaving him in his own eyes, hair, scar, hair. "It's you again."

Shouto has manners. He was raised in the imperial court. He dips his head in a bow, eyes blinking closed.

"Not really one for words, are you." The kelp boy grins. It could have been a mean-spirited comment, but leaves and plants do not set out to harm others intentionally—only those who assume the shape of man partake in such cruelty.

Shouto shrugs, mouth curling down. Midoriya laughs, a bright, braying sound, and Shouto feels his mouth also curling into a smile, pleased that he's made another content. They sit back, disorganised and more like two anchors carelessly thrown out to sea, but there is easy camaraderie, boots and legs bumping as they splay down, dirt and grass in their clothes.

Shouto squints out to where the search party had dispersed towards, and looks

towards the runaway youth. He's not asking any substantial question, just making vague humming vocalisation in his throat, but the youth heard, grin stretching into something shy but unrepentant.

"I'm a bit of a problem child. I run away a lot of the time. My tutor sends search parties like this to stir up a ruckus every time. I apologise that you had to see that. It's very uncouth of a gentleman to run amok still, at my age."

He has a feeling that the apology is rehearsed, performed for the sake of a listening ear elsewhere than for their own ears.

Midoriya tips closer, eyes twinkling. "Wanna know something else though?"

He leans closer, lends an ear.

"The tutors can never find me first, so that's why I escape as often as I fancy the opportunity to."



They slip back into their respective disguises, and wander further inland. There are great hunks of plants and leaves, building on top of another to become a 'tree', as Midoriya had been happy to point out to him, rambling and explaining as they meander through the short path, trees upon trees upon trees.

The collective trees make a forest. It's green and brilliant and cool and nurturing, that for a moment he thinks about begging Father to let him stay for longer, for a week is nowhere near enough, to see everything, sleep on the root of every tree he sees, count the stars on the sky, talk long walks with Midoriya.

"Would you like to see where I live?" Midoriya offers, a standing invitation, a reiteration of their first meeting, still hopeful. Hopeful that he will say yes. Hopeful that he will fall into this honeyed temptation and go where the human asks him to go, jump wherever moss green eyes deem it fit for him to perform a circus act.

He may not speak, but his skittishness speaks plenty. Midoriya, pleasant smile still affixed on his pleasant face—continues to walk, a foot, then another.

"You need not say yes, or no," Midoriya's eyes are very green, light and dark and everything in between. "Or anything at all."

Shouto feels like there's something thrumming in him, fluttering under his expanding ribcage, taking in more air and no air at all. The inconsequential way that Midoriya dismisses his offer just as suddenly as he brought it up. He fits and bends himself, flexible, deliquescent as water, to flit and filter around Shouto.

He's examining a curious pattern on a leaf that had fluttered seemingly from the sky, spinning, freefalling, and Midoriya had snatched it from thin air, moving fluidly in the air like Shouto would in water.

He looks, meets Midoriya's, one free creature to another. The other's mouth moves,

but he isn't pronouncing words. Shouto thinks —*knows* —that he can understand what he's trying to say.

"Alright." Midoriya with the bright eyes and sunlight in the palm of his hands. "It's just this way."



Midoriya had not explicitly made out how he is of royal blood, or that his home came close to a semblance of a well-off castle. Shouto may be mer and mute, but he can tell what distinguished looks like when he sees it.

The castle is mightily distinguished per their entrance, through an alternate gate. The guards saluted Midoriya playfully, and even crassly. Midoriya barks out a returning laugh, clear and strong air and wide, wide shoulders. He takes on a heavy, purposeful gait. The stance of a fighter. It doesn't quite translate to tail movements because they're inherently different on that front, but the general shape and energy of it all, Shouto can recognise. His whole family swims like this, holds themselves in the same manner. He briefly pitches a wild, meandering thought of *What if Midoriya is the heir to the throne of this land?*

Shouto realises that the adage *you attract what you fear most* is frighteningly common in this particular adventuring endeavour of his. A messenger notes their presence, and announces Midoriya's titles loud enough that there is no doubt as to who he is.

"His Highness, Prince and Heir of the throne to the kingdom of Musutafu, Duke of the Yagi House, Izuku!"

Midoriya lets loose a shrill giggle, turning in a turn of jagged footwork, mouth twisting open in a denial.

Shouto nods, meaningfully. His face remains wonderfully impassive, though it had mostly frozen over in sudden realisation.

"Erm. Well," Midoriya coughs, face salmon pink. "That was certainly an entrance."

*Ah. Ahh.*

There was an addendum to Father's land leaving conditions. He had not heed much mind over this clause, for he found no grounds to reasonably believe that he would come to associate with the *Prince of the Land* within his short interlude on land.

Father may be overbearing and a tad destructive but he's yet to be wrong, it seems. *Shouto, under no circumstances are you to meet and liaise with land royalty. It is absolutely forbidden. You are to return immediately if and when you have egregiously carried out this wrong.*

The reasoning for this is rooted in the long history of human royalty hunting mer kind for sports, morbid curiosity, active intent to eradicate their kind completely and often to bring back a living specimen to display as loot before prying human eyes.

It is a mer instinct to be wary of humankind, especially sailors, and he had been superb in attending to that condition. His understanding of humankind had been dreadfully lacking on how royal princes act. As a prince himself in another realm, he was not allowed to dwell beyond the palace grounds. If he had gone beyond its limits, steps were taken to obscure his identity. He certainly would not have been able to bring back any friend to the palace without informing the king on how he acquired that friend outside of palace walls. It simply is not etiquette. Shouto is part delighted to see humankind disregarding all manners, and part horrified that his time on land is excruciatingly limited as of now. Father will know. Father will take him back.

Midoriya reads him with an ease unparalleled to many, even if Shouto had been speaking in their presence. This human castle is bright and homely, though not as stately as he had envisioned a monarch's home to be. Midoriya had been regaling him stories of his youth, arm brushing against Shouto's with every stride, and the part of him that isn't burning up with worry jolts with sudden clarity. He is witnessing a transformation, from kindly Midoriya running from his tutors to reverent beloved Prince, shoulders wide, stride sure, mouth firm. His tone is the same shade of warmth, but this demeanour is chipped from mountains and stone.

"Something wrong?" The Prince, still his friend, but a prince regardless, smiles at Shouto. His teeth are crooked. There is a little scar on his upper lip.

Shouto ignores the pattering of his little human-sized heart. Indulging in the beatings of this organ will only see him breaking the silent spell. He trusts Midoriya and would follow him to the edges of land, but this is a prince of weather-beaten moss and an outcrop of storm-heavy rocks. They do not know each other, even though they feel otherwise. Shouto is a prince of another realm and Midoriya is the prince to this land. They are two events that must never happen to one another.

He shakes his head. Midoriya brushes against him, arm strong, warm, a protector, and he smiles the smiles of suns.



The king of the land, His Highness Yagi, summons Shouto to his presence when he is roaming the palace grounds in reminiscence of a flotsam, endlessly drifting. Shouto, glancing at the tower of books he's yet to finish, mournfully makes himself presentable to the audience of his highness.

Midoriya had commanded princely authority to have Shouto's chamber near his, within walking distance to the private study of his royal highness. Shouto spent more time devouring books in the study than he slept in the royally pressed sheets. It had been only two nights. Midoriya joined him after princely duties and meetings, sweat-soaked and exhausted, often with bruises and jars of ointment. They sat by the glow of the candlelight, Midoriya chatting to him about his day, Shouto reading, fingertips stained with ink, as they scrawled lazy scripts back and forth.

*How are you, Shouto?*

*Your highness, your grace is forever my joy*



Midoriya is much stockier than Shouto, who is a waif of a thing. He lifts his chin to look into Shouto's eyes, the eyes of kelp-choked water. They exchanged little notes of mundane queries. Shouto could not speak, his means of conversation unconventional, yet Midoriya is more than eager to accommodate. His name leaves the prince's lips many times. Shouto. *Shouto*. Like a prayer at the mouth of an altar. The prince is bewitched to him, who is without origin. The king will dispose of him. There are no other explanations.

He bows, a knee meeting polished flooring. The king stands, an imposing silhouette framed by shadow.

"My boy," the gravelly voice of the regent breathes. "Do stand. Come closer, let these old eyes take a closer look at you."

From Father, these words would connote no kindness. However, the king of the land speaks in the voice of suns. Shouto is emboldened. He rises, takes two steps forward. His highness also takes steps towards him. They meet in the light.

The king is nothing like Midoriya. Shouto heard tales of his might and he has seen the tapestries, and this is the end figure of a man who sacrificed his livelihood for the peace and prosperity of his kingdom. A great evil was defeated and the all mighty king dwindled to ember. He burns, though not as brightly. This king had not a child to his blood, but he has two to his name. The resplendent first prince Togata. The young prince Midoriya. They are not his by blood but they carry his will, his essence. Stately Midoriya. Occasionally Shouto's by the candlelight.

"And how marvellous it is that you've come to visit us at last, my dear boy." King Yagi speaks around a smile. "I trust your father is well? King Todoroki is very dedicated to his task. It is warming to see the prince broadening his viewpoint of the world beyond the sea."

The addendum is unfurling, sheet by sheet, until Shouto is inundated with the core. Ah. Perhaps this was why Father prohibited his association with human royalty. They know of them. They know of him.

He keeps his head down. He is unable to speak, spell aside, the shock lancing through his veins. This had been worse than the burns inflicted by Father or the scar that sits over his eye.

"My boy." The king does not scream or thrash or violently cast him away to the edge of everything known. "My kingdom is a haven for all travellers. You are to stay as long as you wish." At Shouto's ordained silence, he *ahhs*. "Or as long as you are permitted. Will you not walk with me to the battlements, young Shouto?"

The stones hail from the shore of limestone from the eastern isles, where the Bagou clan reside. The king tells him titbits about the construction of the palace, of the princes who helped lay the bricks, flatten the floor, sew the curtains. They are as much themselves as the palace. This is their livelihoods. This is home.

"This could be your home too, young prince." The king offers. "My Midoriya is earnest, a good man with a warm soul. With him, you will want for nothing. With you,

he will search for nothing. Will you consider this proposition, young Shouto?"

There is an inlet trickling into a delta into the sea. Denki and Momo slither into this body of water to visit him, ever since he relocated into the palace. Today too, at the king's dismissal, he excuses himself to locate a small raft, pulling and dragging the vessel to water. It is hard work on one's own, but another pair of hands push alongside his, nudging the raft onto water, before stepping inside, offering a helping hand to Shouto. It is the moss prince, eyes and hair wild with recent escapades, bright dots twinkling at him. Midoriya does not entreat him for a favour, does not invite him for company. Shouto grants him company regardless.

Denki, who had heard plenty about the Prince, or as he termed it, the Boy, from Momo who liaised with Takami-san who liaised with his dubious human contact. It is a web of connecting points and Shouto is unfortunately outside of its scope. Denki is beside himself with fascination for the human prince, slithering in his usual form, knocking into the sweeping canoe, rowing away from the bank and into the tepid waters in the centre. Tranquility embraces their jostling of the water. Midoriya smiles, a mouth of crooked teeth and lines etching into the corner of his mouth, with Shouto faintly echoing back a shyer version of it.

Perhaps Midoriya has yet to witness all creatures of the water in their entirety, for he is endlessly fascinated by Momo and Denki flitting by, the two meddlers beginning a slow croon of courtship. Shouto is without voice and appropriate courtship offerings, and he thinks this is hugely inappropriate. They may tease Midoriya, unaware, indulging the fiends in accepting their frolicking taunts.

*There you see him, sitting there across the way. He don't got a lot to say, but there's something about him. And you don't know what it is, but you want to, kiss the boy.*

Midoriya laughs, like a gush of pressed down air breaking to the surface, the call of birds in the free sky. He reaches out a hand, Denki nuzzling into his fingers, nipping at his skin playfully. To his ears, these are nonsensical sounds, the melodies of little aquatic beasts dancing at his fingertips. Shouto glares, as best as he can, so that Denki can kindly move away. They've talked when his hand grazed the water and Momo understood the report they were meant to give Father, but Momo is indulging in Denki's deliquescent crooning. Momo hums along with him. They are a three-piece band of nonsensical sloshing and swimming, Midoriya's hair a halo of burning, shining green. Shouto longs for the water, for his throat and human skin are parched, dried up to wither under the full heat of this prince's smiles, delighted laughter spilling from the shake of his shoulders as Denki curves into a beautiful arc in the air, dipping back into the water once again.

Shouto longs for the water, for the way Midoriya looks at him, in his eyes that hold his heart and words he had yet to give sounds to. He draws closer, riveted, as if he heard with an organ other than his ears. He heard the wanting and the longing. He is close and closer and closer now—

*Yes you want him, possible he wants you to—there's one way to ask him. Go on and kiss the—boy.*

Midoriya is very close now and Shouto feels something in his jaw loosen, something changing in the water. The lord of water commands his presence. Father is angered.

*Shalalala my oh my, looks like the boy's too shy, ain't gonna kiss the boy. Shalalalala, ain't that sad, ain't it a shame too bad, he's gonna miss the boy.*



Shouto slips out of the palace easily, slinking along servants' passages, out through a moat feeding into the inlet and out to sea, where Father emerges, foam popping from his person.

"Heir." He decrees, for Shouto had ceased to be '*Shouto*' and '*son*' long ago. "You are to return to your kingdom. Enough of this foolishness. The ceremony is before us."

He does not cry out in frustration or abject agony. He cannot speak, but he had never spoken against Father. Shouto is drenched in water, but he is so cold now. There is none of that warmth that Midoriya lit in him from before; it is ice that sits on his skin, as he defiantly ventures no closer to Father.

"Heir," the King commands, waves slapping the still air. A storm is brewing. There is trouble beyond Shouto.

He dips his head in a respectful bow, asking without speaking. A little more. Just a bit more. Father ought to look into that storm. Please, another day.

"You have until midday." King Enji pronounces, before disappearing. Shouto is with water, dripping and wishing that he can drown.



He retreats into the prince's study, Midoriya sitting still and warm by the candlelight. He asks no probing questions of where Shouto had been submerging himself untoward, simply rises, helping him into warmer, drier clothes. Shouto had resisted. *A prince, dressing a stranger, like a mere servant?* Midoriya laughed, called him silly.

"It is best to indulge in my whims, my dear."

Shouto rises when dawn sits rosy in the clouds, where he whistles, had in vain, to Keigo-san. The same melody, every day on the battlements. The ocean is in unrest, and Father wishes for his return. They may be at war. He whistles, sharp and shrill, then something emerges into the horizon.

Keigo loves his entrances. He rises like a birth of a sun.

Shouto performs a spectacular recount of the past six days and Father's appearance last night in several quick movements, as Keigo nods, golden mane bobbing in contemplation.

"Ah, Shouto, your highness." He hums. "You truly wish to stay?"

*Not forever. Just a while longer.*

"Well, my prince, we do have a solution. You know I've sworn loyalty to the throne. I've also sworn loyalty to you. I will see it done."



Morning rises. Midoriya and Shouto dine with the king, who speaks pleasantly of a visiting royal family from the southern isles. There is to be a voyage which takes the visitors around the port to peer at the magnificence of the ocean. Midoriya shakes his head, faintly refusing to be on another boat with 'Kacchan'.

Shouto turns to him. Midoriya's breath traces the word *storm* tenderly in Shouto's ear. He catches his shiver and forces it to remain a dormant, sleeping beast. No need to rise.

He traces the words *I wish to stay with the king for a while* and Midoriya departs, passing a hand, strength and calluses, by the back of his neck, before drifting away.

Shouto rises, bows to the king. King Yagi peruses the parchment that he produced from his coat with the utmost concentration, before lifting his eyes to meet Shouto. He has eyes of the ocean.

"It appears that the ocean wants its son back."



Out on the cruise, Midoriya holds him firmly by his waist. Torn between abject misery and inexplicable joy, Shouto remains in the solid embrace of the prince, peering out in anticipated breaths as the sea, amicably still, flows on. He knows there is conflict brewing, yet as he is, he cannot dive into the water without inciting questions. He is to return as Father summons him. Noon draws closer.

"The ocean is kinder towards this old man." The king remarks calmly, peering beyond the horizon. A shout barks from below the deck, drawing an apologetic Midoriya away. Shouto stands by his highness, waiting. Counting.

"You must be wondering if I hold any histories with your father." King Yagi speaks, for he can read Shouto as easily as Midoriya had. "It is a silly rivalry, on my part, though on his end it must have been quite an injurious blow to his pride. He had since been quite stringent on out-of-sea travels, partly due to this misgiving I have dealt in this ignorance of oceanic customs."

*You refused him the honour of combat*, Shouto knows. Father holds onto grudges until they rot and fester away. He is to come now. He waits.

The sea bubbles and froths. Mother and Brother appear. Shouto can sense his other siblings lingering nearby.

"My child," Mother breathes, hand reaching out to him. "Shouto."

Brother waves idly, as a swooping shape overhead dives at him before landing onto the ship post, whistling obnoxiously. Keigo is here.

Shouto looks at the gathering mass. The king by his side calmly places a hand on his shoulder.

"Your Highness," King Yagi speaks, and Mother returns his bow. "How delightful it is to meet you again."

"We must dine again, my king, we have much to discuss." Mother smiles, a kind edge to her mouth. "Meanwhile, Shouto, darling, your father is forthcoming. Come into the water now. We had summoned him to our presence."

Shouto does not think too greatly about the danger of the present situation as he slides down the side rope ladder into tepid water. Touya extends a clawed hand to grasp onto his human hand. The water bubbles and boils below the surface, signaling the arrival of the king, before Shouto is eased below, brother's magic encompassing him.

He is in human flesh, breathing in familiar water through a bubble of air. The royal ocean delegate is fearsome in its wan number—the king, Gang Orca, Inasa, Iida Tensei.

"Father," Touya croons. "How kind of you to turn up."

"Unhand my heir." Father demands, speaking as one would to the enemy of the state. "Before you become an enemy of the ocean."

"The ascension ceremony must proceed, my prince." Inasa dips his head, face impossibly aggrieved. "We cannot delay, for the magic of the ocean is unstable."

Touya does not unhindered Shouto. Shouto wishes not to go with the delegate. Mother, hood drawn, pushes back the rough material. The delegate bites back on a collective gasp. *The Queen!* The rumours said that she died, but those were indeed false. She is here, *habeas corpus*, before the council adjudicating Shouto's fate. He is still under father's magic. He cannot speak much.

"I am the lawful and elected Queen of the ocean." Yuki Rei states, succinct and authoritative. "By claims of magic, the Queen holds authority in appointing the kingdom's heir. You are to provide the blood, Your Highness, but matters of ascension are mine to preside. Do not forget your place, Enji."

She must have looked into the ancient laws. Her magic is powerful, even as she was stripped of most of it when Father casted her in exile. Mother is prefacing this council meeting as if they are engaged in honourable combat, the ancient magic of her person chilling, slowing the rapid pulse of his speeding heart. Inasa opens his mouth to speak. Gang Orca stops him. It is Tensei who speaks.

"The Queen had put forward a motion of contesting the King's legitimacy in appointing the heir. The council finds her claims sufficient per the laws. How do you wish to proceed, King Enji?"

"Laws aside," Touya drawls, pointing at his Todoroki birthmark on his upper arm that no fire could burn away. Father snarls. "Shouldn't birthright hold precedence over preference, Father?"

Gang Orca freezes. He was the royal tutor for Shouto's three siblings, before stepping down to educate the military. He must have known Touya. A lot of people had known Touya.

"The heir had spoken, Your Highness," Inasa turns, no longer cowering. "The rightful heir."

"I am a much ancient part of this ocean, council, therefore I will be frank with you. The sea is in turmoil, the seat of leadership too burdensome. Perhaps if his highness is amenable to our recommendations and willing to reform the throne, balance can be struck once more." Mother never once shakes. She told him she had shaken too many times in his youth, could not have protected him. The scar on his eye held bitter memories for Shouto and her.

"What do you suggest, my queen?" Iida holds a closed fist over his heart, head bowed. Inasa follows the same, as does Gang Orca. They are showing deference to her as per her reinstated status. Father bellows a shocked laugh, a stream of burning water and bubbles.

"She will not make any changes to my throne." He is adamant.

"Would you rather fight the sea on your own instead?" Mother calmly parries. "My children are of my blood. They all hold my colouring and magic. I have a claim to all four, King. Your court is largely diminished without blood magic and how will you rule without heirs? You share the throne now or you will have no throne, for the ocean will ravage your court. Pick wisely, King."

"Shouto," Fuyumi and Denki are by his side. "Go to Keigo. He will tend to you."

Touya lifts a scorched, barely there eyebrow.

"Ah, the little bird. Tell 'im I said hi. And thanks."

Shouto arches an eyebrow, an echo of his brother.

"The sea looks after its own, Shouto. You saved one of its lives, a life will be returned to you." Brother is speaking in tongues, but Shouto remembers. Saving Keigo, drowning in the deep sea. Begging Father to be merciful to those swimming in air. Keigo and Touya liaising. A storm. Keigo and the human vessel.

*Alright.* Shouto nods, swimming away with Momo. *I will hear news from you soon?*

"Very soon, my prince." She squeezes his wrist, reassuring. "Stay with the royals now."





The news arrives in two sunsets. It is unclear whether Father's magic holds steadfast to his person, for Shouto dares not speak. He is in countless meetings with King Yagi, establishing as many connections as one can while silenced, with his highness happily extending a friendly arm to the underwater kingdom, should they agree to his terms and consequent apologies to the king. Midoriya remains steadfast by Shouto's side, arm scandalously bared for him to trace questions and answers onto the golden skin, as they run away from the royal tutor Aizawa and take the little girl Eri to the fish markets. Shouto traces Eri's name in the palm of her hand. She tells him his white hair —Mother's hair —is lovely on him.

The news comes, delivered by Keigo, Momo, Denki and Inasa. The imbalances of magic had been settled, and King Enji is still king, though there is a triumvirate seat in the kingdom, reserved for the Queen and First Son. They will not be frequenting courts unless executive decisions are to be made, upholding authority elsewhere in remote pockets of the ocean. Shouto is free to return to the ocean at his leisure. He can even stay for longer, as he is absolved presently of his duties. There is no need for an heir in the foreseeable future. The triumvirate seat will see Touya then Fuyumi ascending to the joined throne if Father is to step down. There is time. There is a lot of time.

"Shouto!" Inasa booms at him. "You may now speak!"

Shouto turns huge eyes at him. Keigo sighs.

"The king removed his magic, princeling."

"Ah." Shouto speaks, a croak in his throat. It had been a long while. "Thank you all, truly."

"You got good news for us, Shou?" Denki wiggles his brows. "Something Boy related?"

Momo scolds him while Inasa and Keigo turn huge expectant eyes at him. Shouto recalls his highness, eyes like gazing through sunlight striking a forest of leaves.

"I bear King Yagi's goodwill towards Father. The prince and I had declared our intentions to one another. What will proceed, shall proceed."

"He kissed the boy!" Denki cheers.

"How crass, really, eel child." Keigo grins. "He told you about the storm yet?"

"Just who did that?" He wonders, for Midoriya declares him the reason he is still living. Shouto supposed that it was another exorbitant way his intended speaks, but Keigo is smiling his Secret Storm God smile.

"Maybe the ocean wanted you two to meet." Inasa suggests, hopeful. "How romantic."

"Fate." sighs Denki.

"Run along now, before they bring you back." Momo smiles, waving at him.

"I will be back. The human delegation wishes to dine with mother in regard to the bonding ceremony. I shall see you very soon." Shouto promises, sloshing out of the inlet, dripping seawater wet.



By the candlelight, Midoriya Izuku presses feather light kisses into Shouto's hair. *You smell of the sea. Where have you been?*

*Midoriya*, he writes onto the back of a hand, *Izuku. Look at me.*

"Hmm?"

"Your Highness." He is at another cavern, but Izuku is here, warm, moss eyes peering into his. "It is truly an honour to be yours."

Midoriya Izuku blooms, unfurls like a beautiful blooming flower. He smiles into the warmth of Shouto's mouth.

"It is a pleasure, Shouto."

Shmpoamps  
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[STARRLADE] 2020 ♡

# Fantasia Love: Of Centaurs and Fairies

A *Fantasia* AU by Sevan in collaboration with Cade (previous)

## Spring

"Hey there! Tamaki!"

Amajiki couldn't help but jump a little, lifting his front hooves in surprise. Yes, he was supposed to meet the other centaur just now; he was, in fact, the one that had asked Mirio to come to the flower field in the first place. So why was he surprised that his childhood friend had come at the time they had agreed to meet?

Maybe surprised wasn't the right word for what he was feeling. Anxious? Well, Tamaki was a well-known nervous wreck, always worried, always fidgeting around with his hands or pacing around, always ready to face a tree and whisper to himself instead of talking out loud.

But it didn't fit quite right either, no. He saw his childhood friend approaching him, all smiles as he waved in cheerful greeting, and it hit him.

It was the feeling of anticipation.

Tamaki quickly hid the flower crown he had made behind his back, a rose tint on his cheeks as he tried to calm down.

It was customary to gift a flower crown as invitation for the Spring Equinox dance, and an unequivocal symbol of romantic interest if the two centaurs weren't partners already. Which was their case.

What would Mirio say to his offer? Would he think it's a joke and laugh it off? Would he be disgusted by the idea, ending their years of friendship on the spot?

Or would he maybe, just maybe, reciprocate his feelings?

The endless possibilities were making his head spin, so he almost didn't notice when his best friend's legs got caught on something, falling to the ground with a thud, rolling through the field and sending flowers and grass flying around.

"Mirio!" He galloped towards him, still hiding his present behind his back. "Are you okay?"

"I shouldn't have tried to *hoof* it." Tamaki's expression went from worried to sour, causing Togata to start laughing, turning so he would be sitting on the flower bed instead.

Whatever retort Amajiki had prepared died on his lips, his previous blush turning into a beet red face as he took a look at his friend, who was too busy cackling at his own joke to notice he was being observed.

Mirio was head to hoof covered in bits of grass and flowers; some of them had been tangled on his golden hair, almost like Nature itself wanted to gift him a crown. He had his eyes closed as he shamelessly laughed, that beautiful sound Tamaki could never have enough of.

He cursed inwardly, in awe of how cute Mirio was. He didn't know how it happened, when his feelings had blossomed, or if he had always been yearning for his best friend, wanting more than just friendship, but too scared to try.

But the fact of the matter remained; he had fallen head over hooves for him.

Togata then took a deep breath, looking at him with a big grin still illuminating not only his face, but the entire field, brighter than the Sun; his best friend's beautiful smile sure didn't help his blushing face at all.

"I'm okay, don't worry!" Amajiki nodded, not trusting his voice as his friend stood up. "But I'm afraid what I brought you didn't have as much luck as I did."

As he said this, he brought forward his hands, holding a crumpled mess of flowers and branches. It took Tamaki a couple seconds to recognise it as what used to be a crown.

"Y-you were... bringing a c-crown?" He managed to say, his heart doing somersaults in his chest.

"Yeah, I wanted to ask you to come with me to the Equinox dance." He smiled, but there was something different with it: it was almost... shy.

Tamaki had never considered himself brave. He was quiet, shy, jumpy, always avoiding conflict if possible. But in that moment, he felt a surge of courage, as he sat down with Mirio and kissed him.

It was brief, chaste, no more than two seconds. When Amajiki leaned back, he showed his friend the flower crown he had made for him.

Mirio smiled at him, gently taking the present and putting it over his head, complementing the mess of flowers and grass and golden locks.

"Well, I'm glad we stopped *horsing* around, now we can go to the *mane* Spring event together!" Oh he was so proud of that one, Amajiki could tell by his cheeky grin as his cheeks started to heat up.

"Shut up!" He cried, covering his vermilion face as his best friend hugged him, still laughing as his head rested on Mirio's shoulder.

"You signed up for this!" He said, a smile dancing in his voice.

"I know." Tamaki couldn't help to echo his happiness, his own lips curving upwards.

Maybe, just maybe, this was the start of something good.



# Summer

Bakugou huffed, kicking a patch of grass off with his back hooves. How dare Shitty Hair make him wait for their first date?

Well, technically speaking, it wasn't their first date. They had been dancing in that limbo between dating and friendship for over a year, and thus they had been on many 'bro outings', as Kirishima had put it. They had even attended all the festivities together almost from day one, with Bakugou giving the finger to anyone that made jokes about their relationship, if only out of embarrassment more than irritation.

But finally, at the last day of the Summer Solstice festival, he had taken a step forward.

It was after jumping the flames at the beach, a tradition that he always got oddly competitive about—as if he didn't get competitive about everything. They were walking by the shoreline, talking about the festivities, when Kirishima reached for his hand, locking their fingers together.

He had looked at him, the sea glistening under the full moon, long red hair being gently caressed by the salty wind, his smile as warm as the bonfires they had jumped across together. He had never wanted to kiss him more than that night.

And so Katsuki had followed his impulse, leaning to kiss Eijirou for the first time, the tiny doubt of doing the wrong thing evaporating as the redhead kissed him back with enthusiasm.

The rest of the details that night were lost to him in the euphoric haze, but they had agreed on going to an official first date together, and meet by the swings in one of the lakes.

Which was where he was standing now, impatiently trotting around the same spot, to the point of making a perfect circle of stepped-on grass.

About half an hour later, when he was about to give up and go home, his chest hurting like something was breaking inside him, he heard distant galloping getting closer.

"Bakugou?" That was definitely Kirishima's voice, screaming from somewhere in between the block of trees behind him.

He turned around, hurriedly drying his traitorous tears, and soon enough, the centaur emerged from the forest, his hair a mess of branches and leaves.

"I hope you have a really good excuse." He managed to say, ignoring the thundering of his heart.

"Bakugou!" He closed the distance in a trot, stopping a bit further than he usually would, then bowed to him, his hands closed in plea over his head. "I'm so sorry! I went to the wrong lake!"

A few moments passed in silence before Bakugou started laughing, cackling in relief. Of course Eijirou wouldn't bail from their first date, how could he consider that, even for a second?

Kirishima stood back up, at first confused, then joined in the laughter. Once they both calmed down, he reached for his hand, smiling.

"Okay, let's go on our date." Katsuki didn't know if the blush on his cheeks was because he had been running to get there, or the idea of them being on a date.

They walked to the tree that stood by the edges of the water, with a big swing that was being lazily rocked by the summer breeze. Bakugou had prepared a picnic for them, always ready to flaunt his cooking skills.

They ate, and talked, and laughed, and no moment felt awkward, to Katsuki's relief. There were kisses as well, but they felt natural, as if that had always been the next step.

Then Kirishima had insisted on going in the swing, saying that it would truly feel 'like a date' if Bakugou pushed him, as the centaurs had a few courtship rituals, and hanging by the swings was one of them.

Once they were using it, however, they both found the activity rather boring. So Katsuki started to push harder, taking his boyfriend's laugh as permission to use all his strength.

He pushed one last time, and the momentum they had built up sent Kirishima flying, both of them gasping in surprise. He landed at the centre of the small lake, emerging a few seconds later, turning around to look at Bakugou.

"That was..." He started laughing. "Amazing!" He swam back to shore, Bakugou smiling at him. "Bet I can throw you further than that!"

"Oh, you're on, Shitty Hair!" He barked, running back to the swing so Kirishima could try to send him flying.

The rest of their date was spent in ferocious competition to see who could throw the other the furthest. Bakugou was the winner by a landslide, of course.

As they laughed together on their way back, their hands tightly clasped together, Katsuki made sure to promise himself to never, ever let go.

# Autumn

A storm had hit the Fantasia Forest for three days and three nights non-stop, so when the morning brought the chirping of birds and the absence of the rain, Uraraka couldn't help but smile as she got up, lazily stretching her wings along her arms.

Her water sisters, the Rain Fairies, had been working hard the past few days in getting through the weather, and now it was the turn of the Golden and Orange Fairies to pick up where they had left, and get back to work.

Which meant she could see *her* again. And finally ask the question that had been burning in her heart since the first moment she saw her.

Ochaco started to prepare for the day, running around her home, which sat inside the trunk of a maple tree. It was simple, yet it had all her basic needs covered, and she wouldn't have it any other way.

*Well, that's not entirely true*, she thought as her eyes involuntarily trailing at her bedroom door.

Once she had eaten breakfast and got herself all cleaned up, she got to her dresser and reached for a small box she had been working on for a few weeks now, tracing the delicate design of leaves she had engraved on the wood.

"Today is the day!" She whispered to herself, her permanently rosy cheeks lending some pink to the rest of her face.

She pocketed the box in her long orange skirt, then opened the door and stepped outside, her wings holding her in place mid-air as she glammed her door away.

It was a beautiful and crisp autumn morning, the forest fully awakes after the storm, a million sounds and colours that were all familiar and made her feel at home.

She rushed over to the area they had agreed to meet on, touching a leave here and there to make them fall to the ground, waving at the other fairies in passing as she flew from tree to tree.

And when she arrived at the deepest part of the Fantasia forest, she saw her.

Yaoyorozu was looking the other way, but she would recognise her anywhere: her golden dress delicately floating around her ankles, her long hair done up in a ponytail, flowing with the breeze, and her smile as she kindly touched the leaves, turning them into a beautiful yellow before letting them fall, accompanying them on their way down.

As she danced on top of her latest leaf, turning with the wind, she spotted Uraraka. Her whole face lit up, Yaoyorozu's bright smile making her heart go a little bit faster.



"Good morning, Ochaco." She greeted, flying towards her once the leaf reached the ground.

"Morning, Momo!" Once she was close enough, she reached for her hand, leaving a kiss on it and making her girlfriend blush.

"Terrible storm we had the last few days." She lamented as they both flew to stand on top of a branch. "Father was worried the wind would blow our garden away".

"Oh... yeah, it was a big one." She smiled uncomfortably.

While she was just a little common Orange Fairy, her girlfriend was a Golden Fairy. Momo's family were the leaders of the Autumn Fairies, and her daughter in particular had been blessed with both control over the leaves as well as what it was known as Creation, a rare power to have if you weren't a Spring Fairy.

To chase away the fear of not being good enough, Uraraka took her hand and guided her to the leaves, touching one with the tip of her fingers before it slowly started its descent.

"You know, it was a morning like this when I saw you for the first time." Yaoyorozu commented, her cheeks flushed.

"I was thinking the same thing!" She touched the next leaf, smiling at her girlfriend.

"It's strange to think back to when we were little kids." She touched three leaves that were pressed together, all turning a beautiful golden colour.

"So many things have happened since then." The memories brought a smile to her lips.

They had met when they were barely starting to help their parents in the forest duties, and in their teenage years, their friendship had slowly blossomed into love.

Now Ochaco was ready to finally ask the big question, but she was so nervous, she just didn't know how to bring it up.

Was it best to surprise Momo when she wasn't looking, call to her already on her knee? Maybe wait until the sunset, when the world was dyed with their colours during the golden hour?

"Dance with me?" Yaoyorozu's voice brought her back to the present.

She had her hand extended towards her, a light flush tinting her cheeks a pretty pink under the morning sun. Ochaco couldn't even say anything, just smile and take that hand, flying her to the next cluster of leaves.

Touching the biggest leaves around them, the ones big enough to cover them, Uraraka bowed with a smile, releasing the leaves at the same time she started dancing in the air with her girlfriend.

They stayed close to the leaves as they slowly drifted in the wind, twisting and

turning and laughing together. It was a dance many times rehearsed, their wings and feet moving in perfect synchronisation.

When they reached the ground, Yaoyorozu smiled at her, bright and beautiful. Ochaco thought she couldn't be more in love, but she proved her wrong, as usual.

They spent a nice day together, with Ochaco taking care of the leaves and Momo bringing flowers and fruits to bloom and grow, and every now and then, they stopped to dance with the wind and the leaves, content, happy.

When sunset was nearing, meaning that soon it'd be time to part ways, Uraraka sat on a branch and pulled the box to look at it while her girlfriend was handing some nuts to a family of squirrels.

She sighed, turning the wooden box in her hands. If she wanted to do this today, she had little to no time to pull it off. The atmosphere was just right, the golden hour upon them, but she was just so nervous..

"What a beautiful box." Yaoyorozu whispered by her side, making her yelp in surprise.

"Box?" One second she had it in her hand, the next she was throwing it against a cluster of leaves. "What box?" It took her a moment to realise what she had done. "Be right back!"

Ochaco mentally slapped herself as she rushed away. She managed to make one leaf float and catch the box before it hit the ground, gently settling it instead of crashing against the earth.

She landed next to it, checking that it had no damage and letting out a breath she didn't know she had been holding when she confirmed it was intact.

"Are you okay?" Yaoyorozu landed in front of her, her wings twitching nervously.

As the autumn leaves slowly descended around them, the world glowing in orange and gold, Uraraka took a hold of her hand, pressing a kiss on top of it before she kneeled, looking up to stare into her girlfriend's eyes.

"O-ochaco?" Momo's face was beet red, her free hand covering her mouth.

"Yaoyorozu Momo, will you marry me?" She breathed out quickly, opening the wooden box to reveal a golden ring.

With tears streaming down her face, Momo pulled her up for a kiss, soft and sweet, breaking it after a few seconds to let out a choked up laugh.

"Yes, of course I'll marry you!" She beamed, letting Uraraka slide the ring on her finger.

Ochaco then grabbed her by the hips, taking off and making her fiancée spin in the air with her, laughing in relief.

Once again, Momo proved to her she could, in fact, love her a little bit more.

# Winter

*Breathe, Midoriya.*

Izuku had this. He had everything under control. It was going to be perfect.

*Just breathe in.*

Oh, snowflakes, but what if it wasn't? What if he went too fast and collided with them? Or maybe he would be too slow, and his partner wouldn't even look back, forget the soulmate call that all Winter Fairies felt, and ignore the bond that tied them to such a klutz. His biggest fear had always been that he was going to trip and fall into the ice the moment he landed into the lake. Yeah, that would be most embarrassing.

A single note, clear as a tundra winter night, made him jump on the spot, bringing him back to the present. The same sound echoed two more times, the sign that the dance was about to begin, so he closed his eyes and brought his left hand to his chest, taking a deep breath.

It was time.

Every winter solstice at the Fantasia Forest, the Winter Fairies across the world that reached their eighteenth season gathered in a big party and celebrated the Soulmate Dance. It was a coming of age ritual that connected two or more fairies' hearts together, crystallising the romantic or platonic bonds that would last a lifetime.

Izuku had been dreaming about this moment his entire life. Since he was a little kid, the other Fairies from his court had casted him aside, too feeble, too spring-like for winter, with his green hair and predilection for warmer days, just a crybaby who was practically powerless, only able to create soft snow that melted almost instantly.

But this would be different. It had to be different.

He was scared and excited in equal measure, his hands trembling ever so slightly. He took a look around him, dozens of Winter Fairies hovering over the trees like tiny white and blue stars.

Slowly, one of the elders descended to the center of the lake, gently touching the water, the ripples slowly starting to freeze from the point of contact.

One by one, all the Fairies that had been waiting for the dance slowly let themselves go down to the lake. When they touched the ice, they had to add their own power to spread the cold and letting the others join in.

It was said that once both fairies touched the icy surface, they would feel a pull that would guide them to their soulmates. But when Izuku touched the ice, his own power being called upon to solidify the lake, he felt no such thing.

No pull, no gravity, *nothing*.

He tried to choke back the tears as he used his feet and wings to skate through the ice, making sure to stay out of the way of the happy new soulmate bonds that were forming all around him.

He spun around, fighting the impulse to run away, heart heavy and breath panicky, when he saw another Fairy descend into the ice. He couldn't remember to have seen him before, probably from another court, but he was beautiful: his hair, tied up in a bun, was half white like the first snow, with the other half a deep red, something Midoriya had never seen in a Winter Fairy.

The moment his feet touched the ice, Izuku felt it: his heartbeat like a thunderstorm in his ears, a warm sensation spreading across his body, a pull to dance towards him, with him.

As they both moved in the ice, twisting and skating around the other dancers, green eyes met with grey and blue, an intense gaze that made Midoriya blush when he finally stopped in front of him.

His soulmate.

Up close, the Fairy was even more handsome than he had thought, even with the scar covering the left side of his face. Izuku felt a wave of self-consciousness; he clearly wasn't good enough, he was nothing but a clumsy Snow Fairy that couldn't get anything right and-

The boy offered his hand to him, bringing Midoriya out of his head. He held onto it, almost in a trance, and soon he was being pulled into the ice-skating dance with his partner.

"I'm Todoroki Shouto." He whispered, twirling him around.

"M-midoriya Izuku!" He gasped, his face already flushed a bright pink.

Shouto hummed, bringing him closer, the grip on his hand tightening. As they danced, the soulmate bond started to take form; Izuku could tell by the way his emotions synchronised with his partner's, finding home next to each other's.

It was intense, to feel his own emotions exposed and, at the same time to be able to pick up on his soulmate's. It almost knocked him off his feet, wings fluttering nervously, but thanks to the grip on his hand, he managed to absorb the overwhelming amount of information without making a fool of himself.

Izuku felt pain, doubt, anger. He felt loneliness, longing, sadness. It was an echo of his own emotions growing up, and yet there was a deeper suffering and fear that he couldn't quite grasp yet.

"It's because of my powers." Midoriya yelped in surprise. Had he been mumbling his thoughts? "My father is a Summer Fairy, so I can create fire as well as ice." His voice was bitter, sad. "But he's an asshole, I don't want his power."

Izuku looked at him, past the soulmate bond, past the emotions bubbling in his chest, ignoring everything but the Fairy in front of him.

This time, he took the initiative, grabbing Shouto and dipping him quickly, to then hold his hand and guide him through the frozen lake, using his own powers to make a trail of snow to follow them.

He wasn't worried about the other dancers having any trouble with it, for his power was too weak, the snow melting the moment it touched the ice.

"But it's your power too, isn't it?" Izuku said, green staring into grey and blue, giving him a smile he hoped was reassuring.

Shouto stopped moving around, just letting Midoriya lead him through the ice, deep in thought about those words.

Once he seemed to recover, he grabbed Izuku by the hips, lifting him and twirling around, which made the man scream in surprise.

Todoroki started laughing as they circled around, the bun he had his hair in coming undone as they danced. After a few seconds staring at him, Midoriya chuckled as well.

Shouto put him back in the ice and took his hand, fingers interlocking with ease. He started skating backwards, still smiling at him as they danced through the lake.

There had never been a Fairy more beautiful, he thought as he stared at his soulmate, starstruck.

The way his red and white hair, now free of any restraints, flowed gently as he moved. How beautifully his eyes gleamed under the Winter Solstice moonlight, as if the stars had been stolen to give him their shine. And that smile, free of all the pain and anger he had felt when their bond started to form, made his face flush a pretty pink.

The same first clear note was heard again across the forest, meaning the end of the dance was nearing, the consolidation of the bonds, the moment of truth.

Shouto brought Izuku close to him, no more dancing, no more skating, as his hands found his soulmate's hips, keeping him in place.

Midoriya's heartbeat echoed like thunder in his chest, and for a moment he feared the entire lake could hear it, when soft lips pressed against his in a gentle first kiss.

His hands went to run through red and white hair, a few tears trailing down his face, but this time, they were happy tears he didn't mind shedding.

He wasn't rejected by his soulmate, he didn't have to face things alone anymore.

When they parted for air, green, grey, and blue colliding in a lovestruck gaze, he couldn't help but laugh, relieved, his soulmate soon echoing him.

Wherever life took him from then on, as long as he stayed with Shouto, Izuku would always be home.







# Home is a Feeling

A *Hercules* AU by LadyLagunitas

## 1.

All Might's temple stands on a precipice overlooking the calm Grecian sea. Izuku's breath catches when he sees it glowing under the moonlight— it's so much larger than he'd imagined, and for a moment he's struck by its grandeur. Thick columns stretch towards the sky, sturdy above steps made from a stone so white that they gleam, even at a distance. It almost looks as if it's floating above the sea, un battered by time and untouched by the elements. Stars dance in the cloudless night, as clear as the breeze, beckoning Izuku onwards.

He reaches up to his chest and touches the medallion his parents had given him just a few days earlier. The metal is cool and comforting, and his finger finds the grooves of the thunderbolt and he traces the engraving without thinking. Taking a deep breath, he tucks it into his chiton and begins to walk towards the temple steps, ready to learn where he came from and how his parents came to find him.

The temple is impossibly grander up close. Above the entrance, All Might leans over the pediment, the stone sculpted so smoothly it looks almost alive. He wields a thunderbolt in one hand, clouds surrounding him as he descends from the heavens.

Izuku continues inside, and strangely, he doesn't feel out of place.

The sting of the events at the market, where he'd unintentionally destroyed the whole plaza, are still fresh, but his mind is quiet. He came here for answers.

His footsteps echo from the intricate mosaic floor, and it's so quiet that he's startlingly aware of his own breath. The air is placid and full of something he can't name, but wants to call holiness.

At the back of the temple, lit from an unseen source, All Might sits on a throne taller than a mountainside.

Ruler of the skies. God of lightning and thunder. King of Mount Olympus and all the gods who reside there.

The statue fills the room, and it would have been intimidating if not for the kind, protective smile on the god's face. He peers down, waiting patiently for worshippers. It's a face that Izuku knows from stories and art, but it's different to gaze upon it in person. He studies it, and notices that the crest on All Might's shoulder perfectly matches the one on Izuku's medallion.

Izuku stares up at All Might and thinks about all the things that brought him here.

The strength he could never understand nor control. How he never fit in with anyone. Learning that his parents had found him.

The lifelong pain of not belonging.

Izuku gets to his knees and begins to pray. "All Might, please," his voice is soft but it reverberates in the still air, "Here me and answer my prayer, because I need to know." He lifts his eyes and puts his heart into his words, asking, "Who am I? Where do I belong?"

The moment the last word leaves his lips, a breeze whistles through the temple and shatters the quiet. Flames burst to life in the braziers along the temple walls, and a flash of lightning streaks through the hall, striking All Might's statue.

Izuku stumbles backwards, the hair on his arms standing on end. The marble creaks and groans, and suddenly All Might's expression breaks open. The statue comes alive and his stone gaze settles on Izuku, his fierce smile widening. "Izuku, my boy," he says in a voice that is as deep and powerful as thunder, but warm. He reaches out with a massive stone hand to where Izuku has frozen to the spot, saying, "Look how you've grown."

At the sight of the hand, which had moments ago been inanimate, Izuku yelps and darts away in a desperate attempt at avoidance.

All Might laughs like a thunderclap and sweeps him up, his voice full of joy, "Is that any way to greet your father?"

Izuku freezes again, this time slowly turning to look at All Might. "F-f-father?" he stutters, trying to make sense of it all. For a moment, he thinks maybe he hit his head. "You're All Might! God of the skies, lightning, thunder, ruler of the gods themselves and king of O-Olympus!" His voice pitches up an octave as his mind whirs, "If you're my father, that, that make me, a—"

"A god," All Might says, sorrow touching the edges of his wide grin. "Yes. You were born a god."

Izuku collapses onto the palm of All Might's hand, unable to completely understand, but All Might explains: on the day celebrating his arrival, he'd been stolen from Mount Olympus. By the time All Might and Izuku's mother, Inko, had found him, he'd been turned mortal and left on earth. They were forced to watch him grow from afar, never able to bring him home. "Your mother and I did all we could," All Might tells him, his voice brimming with grief. "But only gods can live on Olympus. We watched over you every moment of every day."

Dropping his head into his hands, Izuku mutters to himself as he tries to make sense of it all. He imagines returning to his home in the countryside, with answers but nowhere else to go. "So there's nothing you can do," he says finally.

"Nothing I can do," All Might replies solemnly, "But there is something *you* can do." Izuku perks up as he continues, "Izuku, my boy, if you can prove yourself a true

hero on earth, then your godhood will be restored.” He smiles as if he has all the confidence in the world that Izuku can do it.

He jumps to his feet in excitement, “A true hero!” he exclaims. Izuku doesn’t know what that means, exactly, but if All Might thinks he can do it, then he’ll do it. By the time he thinks to ask follow-up questions, he’s already taken a step off of All Might’s hand and is free-falling through the air.

“Oh!” All Might catches him and sets him gently on his feet, “To begin, find Gran Torino, the trainer of heroes. He’s an unforgiving teacher,” he adds with a subtle grimace, “But he’s the best. Ah, and how could I have forgotten?” He grins and whistles towards the heavens, and a moment later a pure white pegasus descends into the temple. “Your old companion, Pegasus, will go with you.”

Pegasus trots up to Izuku in excitement and headbutts him before he can react. It jogs loose a long-buried memory, and Izuku laughs. They met as babies, surrounded by the sun-warmed clouds of Olympus and the gods’ celebration. He flings his arms around Pegasus’s neck, “Of course,” he breathes, grinning, “Pegasus.”

Suddenly, Izuku feels as if the whole world had been laid at his feet. He runs his hands through Pegasus’ coarse mane, unable to believe the opportunity he’d just been given. Pegasus nudges him meaningfully, so Izuku climbs on his back. “I won’t let you down, father!” he says, his chest full of hope.

With an excited whinny, Pegasus takes flight, not giving Izuku a chance to say his farewell.

All Might’s voice follows them into the sky, full of love and pride, “Good luck, Izuku. My son.”

They soar above the clouds, and when Izuku finally has a chance to look back, the temple isn’t visible. The wind is behind them and the stars, closer than he’s ever seen them, dance around them. Izuku tosses his head back to laugh because he knows he’ll find his way.



Cool air whistles past Izuku’s ears as Pegasus begins his descent to the island. It’s in the middle of the sea, far from all other land and Izuku is excited. He’s never been more excited in his life.

When they land, Izuku leaps down to his feet, ready to start his training after having spent the entire journey hyping himself up.

But what he sees from the ground makes him hesitate. He and Pegasus stand in front of the feet of what was once a giant statue, the copper mottled green and white with age. It must have been magnificent when it was whole, but now it lies in crumbled pieces that make Izuku’s stomach sink. After exchanging a wary glance, he and Pegasus begin to explore.

As they progress deeper into the island, they find that everything is broken and overgrown. Hunks of old columns jut from the ground, blanketed in twisting, crawling vegetation. Waist-height grass whispers against them and ancient, vine-covered trees peer at them through the fog. The only signs of life they see are the goats that scatter as they approach.

The head of the broken statue comes into view, leaning against a jagged rock face. Its cheeks are streaked with salt spray and the eyes are hollow and vacant. Izuku shifts his weight uncomfortably and asks Pegasus, "Are you sure this is the right place?" He'd imagined something a lot grander and cleaner.

Pegasus whinnies affirmatively and nudges Izuku forward.

A sound floating on the air catches Izuku's attention. It sounds like laughing, so Izuku perks up, hoping that Gran Torino would be close by. He follows the sound, climbing through the thick understory until he sticks his head through some bushes and finds a clearing. On the far side of it, a glittering waterfall fills a natural pool that is surrounded by lush, bright green plants. At the water's edge, a group of nymphs chatter and laugh without noticing him. Not wanting to disturb them, he continues to scan the clearing, wondering if his teacher-to-be is here.

A spot of yellowish-brown catches his eye from across the clearing. He squints to get a better look and sees the outline of a body, roughly the size of a child's lying beneath a tree.

Izuku panics.

He leaps through the clearing with a shout and Pegasus crashes through the understory behind him. Izuku's panic grows when the noise does nothing to wake the figure beneath the tree. He drops to his knees beside them, not registering the coarse fur covering the lower half of their body. Izuku shakes their shoulder. "Are you alright?" he asks, shaking them more firmly when they don't stir.

The figure jolts up, and Izuku realizes that they may not be a child, or even a person. All he can tell is that they're old. "I'm alive!" he shouts.

"Y-you're alive!" Izuku repeats, stunned.

The old man gets to his feet, but his eyes are level with Izuku's even though Izuku is on the ground. Deep wrinkles crease his glittering black eyes and mouth, and a set of goat's horns peek out from his white hair. From the waist down, he looks more like a goat than a man. Izuku blinks, trying to clear his vision.

He catches Izuku staring and asks gruffly, "Haven't you ever seen a satyr before?" He brushes his fur clean and doesn't explain any further.

"Um, no," Izuku admits awkwardly. Pegasus nudges him in the back, and Izuku clears his throat. "But maybe you can help us? I'm looking for Gran Torino."

"You're looking at him," he says, "Call me Torino."

"R-r-really?" Izuku stammers. He jumps to his feet and grabs Torino's hand to shake it vigorously, "I'm Izuku, and this is Pegasus! I need your help becoming a true hero!"

Torino gives Izuku a sharp look and massages his hand once it's free. "I can't help you," he says flatly. Then, he turns and walks away.

"Please!" Izuku rushes after him, but Torino moves more quickly than he expected. "I have to do this," he says, jumping ahead to block his path, "Haven't you ever had a dream?"

These words seem to have an impact, and Torino pauses at the entrance of the statue head that Izuku assumes is his home. Torino doesn't look at him, but rests his hand on the door in a moment of deep thought. Then he sighs, as if he knows better, and invites Izuku inside.

Elated and hopeful, Izuku scrambles through the tiny doorway after him, and is awestruck when he sees the inside of the statue. The entire space is filled to brim with painted vases, sculpted busts, gleaming armor, and fierce weaponry. It's like a shrine to heroes and legends from floor to ceiling. Izuku feels like he could spend years in this one room, learning the history of each object.

"I had a dream, once," Torino says, his somber voice carrying from the other side of the room. "I wanted to train the greatest hero, and I wanted the gods to hang their picture in the stars," he sighs. "Then, when people looked up at the night sky, they'd know I'd had a part."

Izuku carefully picks his way through the maze of artifacts and finds Torino contemplating a larger-than-life statue of a hero from another age.

"I trained all of the greats," he says, "And they all let me down. Not a single one of them had what it takes."

"I do!" Izuku cries, eager to prove himself. He wouldn't let Torino turn him away, not now, not after his conversation with All Might. "Here, let me show you!" he grabs Torino and hauls him outside for a display of strength, but even after Izuku hurls a piece of the giant statue into the sea, Torino stubbornly refuses him.

Torino turns away and begins to head to his home, "You're not the first person to come here looking for a teacher. But I can't help you. I'm retired."

"No, wait," Izuku cuts him off before he can retreat into his home, "I need your help if I'm ever going to rejoin my father, All Might, on Mount Olympus."

"All Might?" he frowns and shakes his head, "You're the first to use that one, I'll give you that. But I still won't help you."

Izuku can do nothing but watch as his one chance begins to walk away. He tries to think of something to say, but his voice just dies in his throat. Then, he feels the hair on the back of his neck stand on end and the air thicken with electricity. It's just like back at the temple, and seconds later, a bolt of lightning streaks from the sky and scorches the ground in front of Torino's feet.



He looks up at the sky, which is cloudless and clear, then back to the smouldering patch of grass in front of him. Torino turns slowly back to Izuku, his expression stubborn, "Fine."

"Yes!" Izuku and Pegasus celebrate with a high-five. "When do we start? Can we start now?"

"We'll start something," Torino grumbles, waving for Izuku to follow him.

As it turns out, convincing Gran Torino to teach him was actually the easy part. Training with Torino is far more grueling than Izuku had ever imagined, but he throws himself into it with everything he has. It doesn't matter how trivial the training or task is, Izuku dedicates all of his energy and effort towards it.

Like the initial cleanup. The training grounds are overgrown, and Torino immediately puts Izuku to work clearing it up. He pulls more rubble and trash from the earth than he thought was possible, but works tirelessly until it's done. Through it all, Pegasus is by his side, providing support as Izuku pushes himself through everything Torino throws at him. He unearths the entire stadium almost single-handedly before taking on his biggest challenge: mastering his own strength.

If Izuku wants to be a true hero, then he couldn't break everything— including himself— in sight. Gran Torino guides him through balancing exercises, strength training, weaponry, and even strategy. As a teacher, he's hard to impress and quick to point out Izuku's shortcomings, but the criticism just serves to motivate Izuku to work harder and go further. Good days, bad days, and exhausting days fly by under Torino's strict tutelage.

Izuku isn't sure how many months pass, or how many bones he breaks in the process, but it's a clear, fogless day when Torino takes him aside and tells Izuku it's time for his final test. It's surprising, but Izuku is ready.

When he sees the obstacle course, though, he has a moment of doubt. It's harder than anything else Torino has put in front of him to date. Giant swinging blades, rings of fire, multiple *sharks* (how does a satyr even get ahold of sharks?), and a volley of arrows all stand between him and the completion of his training. Izuku sees the finish line and swallows his trepidation because he's been waiting for this moment.

Izuku begins his final test. As soon as he's around the first obstacle, his nerves fade away and it's as easy as breathing. He finally feels at home in his body, and falls into a natural rhythm dodging every threat. Izuku rescues the fake damsel in record time and gets her to the finish line without harming a hair on her threadbare head.

Torino even looks a little proud.

Before he can say anything, Izuku and Pegasus give each other a celebratory headbutt. "Next stop, Olympus!" he shouts.

"Alright, alright, take it easy."

"I'm ready to help people!" Izuku says, emphatically, "I'm ready to fight monsters and save lives, you know— become a true hero!" He uses this line whenever he really wants something, because Torino, despite his gruff nature, is too sentimental to refuse when there's a dream on the line.

Torino thinks about it slowly, glancing between the completed obstacle course and Izuku, who grins encouragingly. He eventually relents, "Fine," he says, and Izuku jumps in excitement. "You want a real test, then saddle up. We'll go to Thebes."

## 2.

The river guardian, Nessus, is ugly and cruel. He looms above the water, his stringy hair sticking to his face, his mouth full of crooked, broken teeth. He reeks, even at a distance, and he's scared every other living thing from this river years ago. The sunlight is harsh and the river water is cold.

Shouto hates everything about this.

He hadn't wanted to come to this river, and didn't want to talk to Nessus. He certainly didn't want to be running through the frigid, shallow water while Nessus toyed with him. Shouto curses the ugly, cruel, hateful god who had sent him here, thoroughly and completely irritated at everything around him.

Including, but not limited to, the thin, willowy material of his chiton. It soaked through the instant he'd stepped foot in the river, and the delicate material can barely handle the extra weight. It tangles in his legs and he slips, aided by the slick river rocks, and he falls to his hands and knees. The water splashes him in the face, making him reel.

His irritation at the universe grows. Endeavor, ruler of the underworld and his father, always insists on Shouto wearing the showiest, most expensive materials available. It doesn't matter where he goes, or what he does, his finery is meant to distract from his humanity, a gift he inherited from his mother.

Shouto scrambles to his feet, struggling to find purchases on the uneven riverbed. Nessus is getting closer now, laughing as he easily closes the distance between them. Shouto makes the snap decision to head for the trees on the far side of the river. He attempts to dart to the side as Nessus approaches, but the force of the water pushing at him slows him down. Nessus swoops him up in one hand, his palm encircling Shouto from chest to thigh, the pressure just enough to be a warning. He fights in Nessus' grip. Shouto thrashes at him, shouts, and beats his fists wherever he can reach.

"What's the rush?" Nessus asks, bringing Shouto closer and smiling.

Shouto recoils in disgust. "Put me down," he snaps, "Right this instant, or I—" he loses his composure with a furious shout and kicks out, barely missing Nessus' stomach.

This display only seems to amuse the centaur more, and he chuckles, telling him, "Oh, I like when they're *fiery*." Shouto can feel the negotiations slipping away from him as Nessus laughs at his own bad joke.

Shouto tries to break free, beating at the fist that holds him. Nessus' grip tightens as he struggles, adding enough pressure to make breathing inconvenient. "I swear—" he gasps, looking for the words to fully convey his fury, but a voice interrupts him.

"*Halt*," it commands.

Nessus and Shouto both freeze and slowly turn their attention to the voice. A young man stands before them with his hands on his hips and his chin raised.

At first glance, Shouto thinks he's eager.

His green eyes are bright, his broad chest thrust forward, and he has an air of easy confidence hanging around him. The young man is undeniably well-built and classically handsome: strong nose, wide mouth, curly hair pushed away from his face, sun-kissed skin. He stares up at Nessus with an expectant expression, as if he thought the river guardian would turn away at his command.

*Eager and naive*, Shouto thinks.

Nessus surges forward and tries to intimidate him by getting in his face, "*Step aside*," he growls.

But to his credit, he doesn't flinch. His reaction is either very impressive, or very stupid. Shouto isn't really sure which it is until the hero opens his mouth and says, "Excuse me, good sir, I am going to have to kindly ask you to release—"

*So, he's stupid*. Shouto is already in a bad mood, and he doesn't want to waste any more of his time, so he cuts him off, "Keep moving. This doesn't concern you."

He deflates and cranes around to see Shouto better. Oh, what a sight Shouto must be, soaking wet and trapped in Nessus' grip. He stares at Shouto in confusion, "A-aren't you a damsel— ah," he clears his throat, the tips of his ears coloring, and corrects himself, "Aren't you in distress?"

Shouto arches an eyebrow at him, giving him the most impassive, unimpressed expression he can muster. "Not a damsel, definitely in distress, but I'm fine. I can handle it." When he keeps staring, uncomprehending, Shouto adds a scathing, sarcastic, "Have a nice day," to drive home his point. He doesn't need someone wrecking his remaining chance to recruit Nessus.

*Of course*, the hero doesn't listen. He clears his throat and starts to say something that sounds like it's being read from a script, reaching to draw his sword. "I'm afraid you're too close to the situation—" he begins, but Nessus cuts him off with a quick punch to the gut.

Shouto winces as he goes soaring, but doesn't really feel bad for him. He turns his

attention back to Nessus, not noticing when the hero gets up and takes a charge at the centaur.

The ensuing fight is equal parts ridiculous and impressive. Ridiculous because the hero loses his sword within the first minute, and impressive because he resorts to using his bare hands and considerable brute strength. Shouto is forced to watch, bracing himself in Nessus' grip as the two size each other up. Then, the hero manages a well-placed headbutt that sends Nessus wheeling and Shouto straight into the water.

His mood worsens.

"Oh, no," the hero notices his mistake immediately and swoops Shouto into his arms as if he weighs nothing. "That was really dumb," he admits, his cheeks going red. Despite his clumsiness, he's careful with Shouto. His arms are warm and he smells vaguely of sunlight, and Shouto is so unused to kindness that he just lets himself be set gently on a dry rock.

Shouto pushes his wet hair out of his face and musters a blunt, "Yeah, it was."

Unbothered by Shouto's attitude, the hero smiles apologetically in response. Behind him, Shouto sees Nessus picking himself up and readying for a charge. The hero follows his gaze and says politely, "Ah, excuse me for a moment."

Then he turns and barrels towards Nessus, meeting him halfway across the river in order to give him a trashing that Shouto never could have anticipated. He sits where the hero left him and watches the fight while wringing the water from his long hair. "Is this guy for real?" he mutters to himself, and is shocked when a voice by his elbow answers.

"Oh, he's for real."

It's a satyr, and at this point, Shouto can't bring himself to be any more surprised. The satyr starts shouting instructions to the hero and Shouto just watches the ridiculous scene with unabashed curiosity.

It looks like the hero is having *fun* fighting Nessus. He wrestles the river guardian, experiments with different techniques, and toys with him just as much as Nessus toyed with Shouto. The hero leads Nessus in circles, makes him look foolish, and lands several harsh blows before sending him flying out of sight.

Shouto raises his eyebrows and flips his hair over his shoulder. The satyr jumps down from his perch and begins to lecture the hero ruthlessly. His feedback is brutally honest but the hero doesn't seem to mind, he's looking right at Shouto.

"Um," he approaches Shouto and rubs the back of his neck almost sheepishly. It's a striking difference from the confidence with which he'd approached Nessus earlier. "Are you alright, um—?"

"Shouto," he supplies, glancing at him from the corner of his eye. He pretends to fuss with his hair. "Do *you* have a name, or are you off to run headfirst into another situation you shouldn't."

"Oh, I, um," he stammers helplessly, a faint blush rising to his cheeks.

It's strangely endearing, so Shouto arches an eyebrow at him, unsure of why the shyness suits him so well. It's at complete odds with his broad, heroic build. "Are you always so articulate?"

"I-Izuku!" he manages, "My name is Izuku."

Shouto hums and turns away, the name rooting itself in his memory. Izuku is eager and easily flustered, and when Shouto looks into his kind, nervous smile his bad mood begins to melt away.

Izuku is genuinely concerned about Shouto and how he got tangled up with Nessus, but Shouto carefully dodges the questions. He wrings what water he can from his chiton and fixes his air, all while subtly teasing Izuku, who won't stop looking at him, as they talk. Behind Izuku, his winged steed and satyr teacher stare with pointed irritation.

After a point, there's not much else to do but return to his father, so Shouto smooths out his clothes and bids Izuku farewell. He tries to offer Shouto a ride, but Pegasus doesn't seem keen on the idea. Shouto sidesteps the offer, pleasantly surprised when Izuku looks disappointed.

"Good bye, Izuku," he says, waving over his shoulder as he walks away. He can feel Izuku's eyes on his back, but Shouto waits to turn around until he's absolutely sure he's out of sight. Then, he waits beyond the treeline until he sees Izuku and his companions take to the sky, their good deeds completed. They vanish into the clouds, and Shouto catches himself smiling.

But he has to deliver the news of his failure, so he smooths the smile from his face and steels himself for the conversation to come. He heads into the woods and runs into Pain and Panic first, who he ignores in a desperate attempt to preserve some of his patience.

The tell-tale scent of burning that precedes Endeavor fills the woods.

"Shouto."

Taking a deep breath, Shouto turns around to face him. He can tell by the look on Endeavor's face that he already knows. He stares down at Shouto with his arms crossed over his chest and Shouto stares back, challenging him to break the silence first.

"Would you care to explain what happened here?" he asks, and Shouto feels a pang of satisfaction at the victory. He looks defiantly away, and Endeavor continues, his deep voice blunt with an edge of anger, "You were told to recruit the river guardian for my uprising, yet here you are, empty handed."

Ah, yes, the uprising Endeavor has been planning since before Shouto could even walk. He's heard it all before and already knows how this conversation will play out.

"I gave it my best shot," he replies sourly. "It wasn't my fault. This hero, Izuku showed up and ruined everything before I had the chance," the name slips out of his mouth, and he doesn't realize his mistake until too late. Endeavor's expression darkens and his gaze turns slowly to Pain and Panic.

The imps start to chatter.

"Wait," Pain says, his voice puzzled, "Izuku..Izuku. That name sounds so familiar."

"Maybe," Panic starts, thinking hard, "Maybe we owe him some money?"

"Oh, wasn't he that kid we were supposed to—"

Shouto watches with carefully muted interest as they freeze and look fearfully at Endeavor.

His father, right on cue, explodes. The flames on his face and shoulders flare to life and burst forth at a temperature so hot it scorches everything in the surrounding area. The trees are mutilated from waist-height up, the canopy destroyed. Endeavor turned it into a wasteland before rounding on Pain and Panic. They start to scramble away, but he reaches out and drags them towards his feet, growling, "You *said* you took care of it."

Pain and Panic tremble, unable to speak, but they don't have to, Endeavor is already ranting.

"You *know* the importance of this plan," he booms, dragging them closer, and yes, Shouto has heard it all before. Recruit all the beasts and monsters on earth, unleash the titans when the stars align, and take All Might's seat in Olympus. This is all old information, but the next part is new, "He's the *one* person," Endeavor shouts, towering over them. His flames grow hotter, and Shouto takes a step back, "The *one* thing that can destroy this plan, and he's just waltzing around, playing hero?"

Now *that* is interesting. Shouto never knew that Endeavor's plan had a weakness.

"We-we made him mortal!" Panic interjects desperately. It's a good attempt at cooling Endeavor's mood, but it's not quite enough.

"A-and there's still time!" Pain adds.

Endeavor pauses, and Shouto can see the gears in his head turning as he considers this new development. "Right," he says slowly. "Lucky for all of you, there is still time." He smirks, crossing his arms together in thought, and the look on his face makes Shouto's heart sink.



There's not much Shouto can do to keep Endeavor's plan from unfolding. As much as he hates to help him any way, shape, or form, Shouto is tethered to the underworld. If he ever wants to be free, he has to obey.



So despite the guilt already twisting in his gut, he hurries through the central plaza of Thebes, pushing his way through the crowded walkways. He waits until he catches sight of Izuku before reciting his lines, "Help, help, please!" he begs the crowd, making his voice thin and desperate.

When people avert their eyes, he reaches out to get their attention. They shake away his grasp with obvious disgust, and while Shouto expects them to ignore him and needs them to turn away, he gets angry. Maybe, if Shouto is lucky, Izuku will turn away, too, but he already knows what will happen. "There's been a terrible accident," he pleads, "Please, help."

From the corner of his eye, Shouto sees Izuku notice him. His expression brightens for a moment before his brow furrows in concern. "Shouto?" Izuku eases his way through the crowd and towards him.

"Oh, Izuku," Shouto says breathlessly. He reaches out, but is startled by the warmth and gentleness of Izuku's hands. "Thank goodness," Shouto adds, leaning against him and peering into his face. This is a line that someone else wrote for him, but there is a part of him that's happy to see Izuku.

"What's wrong?" he sounds so, so concerned, and Shouto is struck by how much he doesn't want to do this. "Are you alright?"

He hides his face against Izuku's chest, unable to lie directly. "There's been a terrible accident. Outside of town, two little boys, th-they were playing in the gorge," Shouto can hear people beginning to murmur around him, "There was a rockside and now, now they're trapped!"

Izuku perks up and steps away before spinning around to the satyr, "Torino! Did you hear that?" He swoops the satyr into the air and spins him around, "An accident! This is great!"

It's really not the reaction Shouto had been expecting. Before he can say so, Izuku grabs him by the hand and hoists him on Pegasus' back.

"W-wait," Shouto stammers, not acting this time. He tries to get down, but Izuku is already in front of him and nudging Pegasus forward. He freezes, the reality of what's coming hitting him all at once. Pegasus seems to sense his trepidation, because the steed throws him a vaguely threatening look before spreading his wings. Shouto has never had much luck with animals of any kind, and he doesn't feel good about this one. "I have a terrible fear of h-heights—" but they're already in the sky. Shouto manages one look back before his stomach knots up, then he flings his arms around Izuku and presses his cheek hard into Izuku's back.

He feels the rumble of Izuku's laughter and squeezes his eyes closed, waiting for it to be over. The air is cold and it whistles past his ears, and Shouto feels like he's going to be sick. He focuses on his breathing and the feeling of Izuku's solid back against his cheek, one of his hands resting on Shouto's.

They land after what feels like forever, and even though Shouto wants nothing more than to have his feet on solid ground, he's unable to let go. Izuku chuckles

before gently freeing himself from Shouto's grip and dismounting. He makes a funny face when he looks at Shouto, "Are you alright?" he asks, his laughter fading.

"Fine," Shouto croaks, feeling absolutely not fine. "Just get me down before I ruin the upholstery." Pegasus whinnies indignantly and bumps Shouto off, but Izuku is there to catch him.

"Help! I can't breathe!" a high, panicked voice cries out from the gorge.

The other one comes not long after, "Hurry! We're suffocating!"

Izuku's expression turns serious, and suddenly Shouto can see his potential. It's visible for an instant before Izuku leaves Shouto to watch the consequences of his actions unfold. He still feels sick, partially from the flight over, but mostly because he's been forced to do things he would never do otherwise. He makes for higher ground, where he can safely watch.

Pain and Panic, disguised as human children, cry out from beneath a rock as large as the bustling plaza in Thebes. "It's alright, I'm here," Izuku says in that big hero-voice he used with Nessus. It carries across the gorge.

Izuku doesn't waste any time. He gets his hands under it and heaves, but the boulder just groans under the pressure. A crowd begins to gather, and Shouto can hear them already lamenting the loss of the trapped boys.

But Izuku doesn't give up, he adjusts his grip and lifts again, and this time, the rock begins to move. From his vantage point, Shouto can see the muscles of Izuku's legs bunch and tighten with the effort.

Slowly, the boulder begins to shift. Loose stones clatter to the ground, echoing in the silence of the gorge. The crowd waits with bated breath, all eyes focused on the young hero. The rock groans, and bit by bit, begins to come free. Izuku continues to raise it, not stopping until it's well over his head and the boys have scrambled to safety. He doesn't set it down until after he sends the boys away with heroic words of caution. The crowd claps politely but unenthusiastically. Shouto doesn't applaud, but he smiles because he can understand why Endeavor would fear his strength.

Izuku casts the rock aside with flourish and it shakes the ground when it lands. Shouto is so focused that he doesn't hear Endeavor's praise for a job well done. Shouto knows that there's still more to come, and the longer Izuku stays, the more dangerous it will become. "Get out of there, Izuku, while you still can," he murmurs to himself, folding his hands against his stomach.

Torino notices the rumble first. He points at the cave that was hidden by the boulder then flees, leaving Izuku at the entrance. The cave is seemingly bottomless, but something is emerging from the black depths.

A scream slices the air, and a collective gasp of horror ripples through the crowd. A beast steps into the light. Endeavor laughs.

Shouto's heart sinks like a stone to his belly. The beast is massive, with violent

purple skin and orange predatory eyes. Its teeth curve out of its mouth, each one easily as long as Shouto's arm. The hydra stands as tall as the cliffs behind it and lifts its angular head to roar at the sky.

Izuku takes a hesitant step back. He's unprepared, and the hydra seizes the opportunity. It snaps towards Izuku, as fast as lightning, and he barely manages to avoid its wicked teeth. He draws his sword, but a moment later it gets sent flying. Izuku dives for it, the beast snapping at his heels. There's a short scuffle, then Izuku has his sword, and it happens so fast—

The crowd gasps, and there are screams. Shouto watches, frozen with horror, as the hydra swallows Izuku, sword and all. He feels like he's going to be sick because he'd sent an innocent man to his death. Shouto turns to Endeavor, who is radiating joy, and swears to do whatever it takes to keep him from Olympus.

Another cry drags his attention back to the gorge. Shouto whips around, hoping desperately to see Izuku miraculously in one piece.

There's nothing, at first, then he sees it.

The skin of the hydra's throat protrudes, warping and bulging unnaturally moments before the edge of a gleaming blade pierces through the tough skin. Izuku *cuts* his way out of the monster's gullet and beheads it from the inside. He stumbles onto the ground and the head of the vicious creature falls lifelessly to the bottom of the gorge.

Tentative hope soars in Shouto's chest, and the crowd begins to clap. He hopes it was that easy, but spares a glance back to Endeavor. He's smiling, so Izuku's still in danger.

Torino helps Izuku to his feet and begins to guide him away from the body of the beast, right as a cool rain begins to fall. It's when his back is turned that the hydra moves again.

It writhes at first, like delayed death throes. But the body gets to its feet and stumbles forward. A great mass bubbles at the severed edge of the dead creature's throat. Izuku stares at it, frozen to the spot.

Three heads spring up in place of the severed first.

Izuku is forced on the run again. He whistles for Pegasus, who streaks down from the sky. Together, they take the battle to the air.

Pegasus soars deftly between attacks, dodging the teeth and claws that seem to come from all sides. Izuku slices at head after head, and for each one that falls, three more spring up in its place.

Soon, he's left staring at a beast with heads and teeth too numerous to count, but he raises his sword and pushes onward. His inexperience shows, but there's something captivating about watching him fly. Shouto clenches his hands and presses them into his belly, growing more nervous by the moment.

There's a terrifying stretch of time when Shouto can't see Izuku after he was thrown from Pegasus and sent into the hydra's mass of heads. When he reappears, the hydra has him pinned to the cliffside, claws carving deep gashes into the rock, and all eyes are on him. Everyone holds their breath except Endeavor, who laughs.

Unable to watch, Shouto closes his eyes. He can still hear the beast roaring and hissing, and the rain on his skin does nothing to distract him.

Then, a tremendous boom.

The ground beneath Shouto trembles, and he opens his eyes in time to see stone raining from the sky. Another landslide. The cliff gives way and a giant plume of dust fills the gorge. There's a split second of quiet, and then it's so loud Shouto can't even look at it. Rocks and boulders tumble down for what feels like an eternity. It feels like the earth is giving way beneath his feet, but it's just more rock falling.

When it stops, another silence settles over the gorge.

Shouto sees that the hydra is buried under the landslide, but there is no cheering. There isn't even any crying.

Izuku lost.

He turns to his father, a deep, boiling anger rising within him when he sees the smug satisfaction on Endeavor's face. Shouto doesn't even know what he wants to say, but his mouth opens, hot words on the tip of his tongue. But then, Endeavor's expression changes, morphing from disbelief to unbridled fury in the blink of an eye. Shouto follows his gaze.

His eyes land on Izuku right as a riotous cheer goes through the crowd.

Izuku, worse for wear but alive, emerges with one arm raised, triumphant.

"Well," Shouto murmurs, his shoulders dropping in relief. "What do you know."

In the following months, Shouto has the distinct pleasure of watching Endeavor try and fail to bring Izuku down. If anything, the endless assaults of disasters and beasts only drive Izuku's popularity and skill skywards. The sea serpent, giant lions, boars, the minotaur, Endeavor throws every beast he has at Izuku but the young hero defeats each and every one. Shouto watches every battle and doesn't bother to hide his smile when Izuku wins.

Fortunately for Shouto, his father is so busy counting down the seconds until the stars align that he all but ignores him. He enjoys the sliver of freedom until it comes to an abrupt halt.

Twenty four hours before the stars align, Endeavor turns his attention back to Shouto.

It's after another one of Izuku's heroic feats. He didn't lose his sword or break any bones, so it was actually among his best victories.

"He must have a weakness," Endeavor growls, watching the celebrations from afar. He studies the scene below, for a long moment, his knuckles white on the railing. Suddenly, with clarity, he says, "Maybe I've been going about this the wrong way." Slowly, his gaze shifts to Shouto. "You," he says. "You must find his weakness."

Shouto folds his arms and stares obstinately back at him. "I won't," he replies stubbornly.

Endeavor smirks, as if he'd expected that response. "If you do this," he says, "If you bring me what I need to destroy Izuku, well..In return," It's a testament to how desperate he is, because Endeavor goes on to offer Shouto the one thing promised never to give him. "I will grant your *freedom*."

### 3.

"Well, father," Izuku puffs up his chest, brimming with pride. He's back at the temple where this all began, sharing his heroic deeds with All Might, who listens with rapt attention. Izuku fills him in on every battle and heroic deed he'd completed since fighting the hydra. Pegasus, his reliable companion through it all, helped him reenact the most exciting scenes. "I've been waiting for this day for as long as I can remember."

All Might blinks, "And what day is that, my boy?"

"The day I can finally rejoin you and mother in Olympus," Izuku says. His nerves suddenly flare to life under All Might's sympathetic gaze.

"Oh, Izuku," the god of the skies, occupying his great stone statue, leans back in his chair. "You've certainly done well," the boisterousness seeped out of his voice, as if he wasn't sure how to proceed. "And you've learned so much, but."

Izuku's heart drops.

"But you're still not a *true* hero."

It hits him like a ton of bricks. He's the number one hero in Greece, his parents will never want for anything again, and he's taken down every monster the world has thrown at him. He doesn't know how to be any more heroic, so he asks, "What does that *mean*?"

But All Might doesn't tell him, not directly. "Look inside your heart," he says, before leaving Izuku alone at the temple.

Izuku waits for a while, to see if All Might would return, but eventually returns home. He uses the journey to think, and reassesses his every battle, looking for his shortcomings. All Might's parting words ring in Izuku's head, leaving him feeling more confused than ever.

He had been so sure that he was on the right path, but now, as he takes in his massive property and mansion, it all feels hollow. The perfectly manicured gardens

no longer feel like a reflection of his success, but a waste of time and space. Many of the rooms in his vast home were as empty as the day he'd moved in, waiting for purpose.

Things that didn't bother Izuku before his conversation with All Might begin to get under his skin, like his overflowing schedule and overzealous fans. He tries to talk to Gran Torino about it while sitting for yet another vase painting, but he's successful only in driving away the short-tempered painter, again.

It's then, when Izuku is at the height of his frustration, that Shouto reappears in his life. He shows up when Izuku least expects it, months after their last encounter, after Torino chases out a group of unruly fans.

Izuku is hiding behind a curtain, waiting for the storm to pass, when he hears a familiar voice.

"Let's see. What could be behind curtain number one?"

The curtain flies open, and Izuku is face to face with Shouto, who looks even more perfect than Izuku remembered. He yelps in surprise, both because he's shocked to see Shouto and because he's embarrassed to be caught hiding in his own home. "Sh-Shouto!"

Shouto looks him up and down, taking in the disheveled state of his clothes and rumpled hair. He lifts an eyebrow and says, "Izuku."

Scrambling from his hiding place, Izuku does his best to make himself presentable and stammers honestly, "I-it's great to see you. I missed you."

He gives Izuku a small, knowing smile before turning gracefully to take in the room. Izuku takes a moment to take in his appearance. Shouto's long hair is swept up into a high ponytail that cascades over one shoulder. The material of his dusky violet chiton whispers against the tile as he walks, hanging perfectly from his lithe frame. He looks like a statue come to life.

"So," he says, dropping onto the plush cushioned sofa and pulling Izuku from his observations, "This is how the top hero lives?" He stretches his legs out, brushing his fingertips on the trinkets sitting on the table beside him.

"Oh," Izuku rubs the back of his neck sheepishly, "I'm no hero."

"Sure you are," Shouto says seriously, "Everyone in Greece thinks you're the greatest thing since they put the pocket in pita," he holds up a vase painted with Izuku's face to prove his point.

"I-I guess I can't really go anywhere without fans—"

Shouto quickly interrupts him, "You sound like you could use a break. What do you say?"

"Oh, I don't know—"



Shouto rises from the chair and comes to Izuku, putting a warm hand on his arm, "Just follow me," he says quietly, his voice low and smooth. "Out the window, around the training yard, you lift up the back wall, and we're gone."

This close, Izuku can see all the different colors of Shouto's eyes and it's like looking into the sea after a storm. He can see his own image reflected in blue, gray, brown, and gold, and he wonders how lost he could get in that gaze. His heart feels like it's going to hammer out of his chest and he is acutely aware of Shouto's delicate touch on his arm. His brain goes blank and he finds himself agreeing before his mind has a chance to catch up to his mouth.

"Perfect," Shouto says, then turns and beckons as if it's his house and not Izuku's.

Izuku doesn't mind. He follows obediently, thinking that he would follow Shouto anywhere.

He's not disappointed, because Shouto takes him out for a wonderful day. They go to a restaurant near a bay, where they're treated to a private room and all of the house specialties. They eat until they're going to burst, talking and laughing the entire time. It feels so *nice* to have a regular, engaging conversation with someone, and Izuku can't believe how quickly time flies. From there, they go to a play, where they secure terrible balcony seats and end up whispering to each other the whole time. Izuku never wants the day to end.

The day fades into evening, however, and they take the long way back to Izuku's property. Izuku takes Shouto to the garden, feeling like they're the only two people in the world. "That was incredible," he says, breathing in the fresh evening air, "Thank you, Shouto. I had an amazing day."

"Don't thank me just yet," he replies, giving Izuku a soft smile. It's tinged with sadness, but it's gone in an instant when Shouto gasps and falls forward. Izuku catches him on instinct, painfully aware of the way Shouto feels against his chest.

"Ah, thank you," he murmurs. He lifts one sandaled foot and explains, "Weak ankles."

"Well," Izuku sweeps Shouto off of his feet and into his arms before he can think better of it. "Maybe you should rest a bit," he tells him. Izuku takes Shouto to the garden bench and carefully sets him down.

There's a faint pink blush on Shouto's cheeks and his lower lip is pulled between his teeth. "So," Shouto glances at him, his fingers playing nervously with his shawl. "Do you have any problems like this?" He lifts his ankle, and Izuku is suddenly *very* close to Shouto's graceful, shapely, leg. "Weak ankles, I mean."

"O-oh, uh," Izuku swallows and politely lowers Shouto's leg, scooting over a little at the same time. He clears his throat, "No, not really."

Shouto follows him along the bench, leaving the shawl behind and peering up at Izuku through his long lashes, "No? No weaknesses?"

Izuku scrambles back, suddenly overwhelmed. Shouto touches his knee, asking another question, and Izuku almost jumps out of his skin. He didn't even hear the words, because Shouto's hand is now on his chest and his chiton is slipping down his shoulder. "I'm afraid I'm as fit as a fiddle," Izuku wheezes. He tucks the strap back into place and escapes the bench.

"So you are perfect," Shouto sighs, sounding relieved.

"I don't know about that," Izuku replies, feeling more grounded now that he's on his feet. He picks up a stone and skips it across the pond, realizing his mistake as soon as he sees the stone veer towards a statute perched above the water. It hits the statues and makes the arms fall into the pond, because of course Izuku would forget his strength in front of Shouto. "Ah, oops," he says.

Shouto comes to stand beside him and says, "I think it looks better that way."

Izuku laughs, and whatever remains of the strange atmosphere dissipates. "You know," he says, "When I was younger I would have given anything to be just like everyone else."

"You want to be selfish and petty?" Shouto asks, turning away. He drifts along the edge of the pond, and Izuku can't see his expression.

"Not everyone is like that," he replies softly.

Shouto casts a long, melancholy look over his shoulder. "Yes, they are."

Izuku is struck by a familiar loneliness, but for the first time, it isn't his. His heart constricts and he trails behind Shouto. "You're not like that."

Shouto glances over his shoulder, his expression forlorn. "How do you know what I'm like?"

"Shouto," Izuku closes the distance between them and grabs his wrist. Turning Shouto gently to face him, he says earnestly, "You're amazing. And when I'm with you, I feel," he searches Shouto's face, for a moment at a loss for words, "Less alone."

"It's better to be alone," he says, slipping out of Izuku's grip. "Then no one can hurt you," he sits at the water's edge and folds in on himself. He holds his arms close to his body, as if closing himself to everything around him. The sadness makes Shouto look small, but not fragile.

Izuku breathes his name once more and sits next to him. He takes Shouto's hands again, gently, slowly, and tells him, "I won't ever hurt you."

His eyes widen, and he quickly replies, "And I don't want to hurt you." There's a vulnerability in his voice Izuku hadn't expected, and it's as if he's looking at Shouto for the first time. The air grows thick between them, and Shouto leans towards him. Izuku can't help but bring him a little closer, closing both of Shouto's hands in his own. The words begin to leave Shouto's parted lips more slowly, "So maybe we should both do ourselves a favor and just—"

Izuku can feel Shouto's breath on his lips. They're moments away from kissing, and while Izuku hears Shouto's words, their meaning doesn't register. Instead, Izuku is aware of Shouto's warmth, the way his eyes begin to drift shut. Time slows down, but Izuku's heartbeat accelerates.

Then, they're interrupted.

Their tender moment is shattered by a bright light and yelling, and Izuku sees his own disappointment mirrored in Shouto's eyes. Of course, Izuku couldn't escape his responsibilities forever, and it was only a matter of time before Torino caught up to him.

Torino and Pegasus descend from the sky, both of them wearing expressions of irritated disappointment. Shouto tries to take the blame, which Torino is quick to assign. Then, Izuku's being dragged away, but he can't leave Shouto without... something. He pulls away from Torino and returns to Shouto.

"Sorry," Shouto says honestly.

Izuku reaches up and plucks a flower from a tree, "He'll get over it," he murmurs. He offers Shouto the flower and brushes his long hair over his shoulder.

A delicate blush rises to Shouto's cheeks, and he brings the flower close to his chest with both hands. While he's looking down at the soft, white petals, Izuku places a quick kiss on his cheek before climbing onto Pegasus.

The delighted surprise on Shouto's face sends Izuku right to cloud nine, and he doesn't look away from that expression until Pegasus takes to the sky.

Izuku spends the next several hours in a heightened state of bliss. He hadn't known it was possible to feel so *incredible*. He can't stop thinking about the wonderful day he'd spent with Shouto, and the prospect of seeing him again made Izuku positively buoyant.

Torino tries to talk him down and tells him to focus, but Izuku has waited his *entire* life to connect with someone like this. He won't let it get in the way of his heroic goals, but he also wants to enjoy it, at least for a little bit. Izuku gets a nice, long lecture before his teacher gives up and retires for the evening, then he has the training grounds to himself. He's just about to start running laps to burn off some of his glee, but an unfamiliar voice interrupts him.

"Good evening, Izuku." The voice belongs to a broad, intimidating figure cloaked in flames. He takes a step forward and says, "I am Endeavor, lord of the dead. I have a proposition for you."

Izuku sighs, his good mood slipping away. "Now really isn't a good time," he turns away, but Endeavor appears right in front of him.

"I need you to take a day off from your heroics," he says, as if Izuku hadn't said anything at all. He reeks of bad intentions, and his next words cement Izuku's distrust in him. "The *next* twenty four hours."

Drawing himself up to his full height, Izuku says sternly, "That's not going to happen." Nothing good would come of Izuku relinquishing his responsibilities for the day, and it was obvious that Endeavor thinks Izuku is a fool.

"Here's the thing," Endeavor says. He snaps his fingers, and Shouto appears in a flurry of dark smoke.

"Izuku—" Shouto's eyes are wide and concerned, "Whatever he says, don't listen to him!" then he vanishes with another snap of Endeavor's fingers.

"Shouto!" Izuku's heart leaps into his throat, and he rounds on Endeavor, taking a bold step towards him, "What have you done to him?"

"Nothing," he replies, "And if you agree to give up your strength for the next twenty four hours, nothing will happen to him." Endeavor takes a step forward, and he's close enough now that Izuku can feel the heat of his flames. He peers down his nose at Izuku and asks, "Well, what do you say?"

All of Izuku's senses are screaming at him to refuse, but that brief glimpse of Shouto's face replays in his head. He'd been afraid. Desperate.

Izuku clears his throat, "People are going to get hurt, aren't they?"

"Not necessarily," Endeavor lies. "People get hurt every day, so I can't prevent that. Besides, isn't Shouto your top concern?" he asks, and Shouto appears behind him again, this time bound and gagged, his eyes furious. "Well, Izuku? Time is running out."

Izuku knows he shouldn't agree, but he can't see Shouto like this and not do anything. "Promise he won't get hurt." Shouto cries out, shaking his head, but Izuku keeps his eyes on Endeavor. "No harm will come to him," Izuku says slowly.

"Of course, he gets hurt and the deal is off." Endeavor waves his hand impatiently, "That's simple enough, Izuku, but I need an answer."

Shouto continues to shake his head as Izuku's gaze jumps between him and Endeavor. Izuku is torn, but there's no other way he can guarantee Shouto's safety, and he wouldn't put it past the lord of the dead to take vengeance if Izuku refuses. "Fine!" Izuku says finally, following his heart.

Endeavor laughs, and they shake on the deal. His vicious grip saps Izuku's strength until he's so lightheaded and nauseous that he drops to the ground, unable to stand. Gravity is suddenly unsurmountable.

"Perfect," Endeavor says, brimming with smug satisfaction. He begins to leave, but turns back as if he'd suddenly remembered something. "Oh, and Shouto," he says, "Thank you, son. You played your part beautifully."

Horried, Izuku manages to lift his heavy head to look at Shouto, waiting to hear him say that it isn't true.

Shouto is no longer bound, but he doesn't speak. His mouth is open and his eyes are wide, but he can't seem to find the words. Guilt and horror twist his features,

and he crawls to Izuku's side, "I had no choice," he says, his beautiful eyes welling with tears. "Izuku—"

With a strangled, broken cry, Izuku crumples to the ground. He feels completely hollow, as if he'd been carved out from the inside. Endeavor is laughing as he leaves, and Shouto is apologizing over and over, but Izuku can't even stand. It feels like his heart has been ripped from his chest.



All of Thebes is screaming.

Izuku can smell the acrid smoke rising in the hot air, and beneath him, the ground is quaking. He can hear, too, his enemy bellowing his name, calling for him. He pushes through the nausea and gets to his unsteady feet.

"No, Izuku," Shouto rushes to his side, his face streaked with tears. "You can't go out there like this, not without your strength." Izuku squares his jaw and looks ahead, and Shouto pulls at him, begging, "Please, you'll be killed."

Izuku's heart breaks a little more, because as much as it hurts to have been betrayed, Shouto's concern is genuine. He has no choice but to fight, now that he's standing, he can see the cyclops ravaging the city. "There are worse things," Izuku says, but regrets it immediately. Shouto's expression shatters and he takes a step back, his hands open and reaching in an unspoken despair.

Izuku doesn't remember the walk to the plaza, and he can't keep his head straight as the fight with the cyclops begins. He is there because the city needs him, but he's barely strong enough to lift his arms. Izuku can't, and doesn't, put up much of a fight. The blows he receives from the giant are almost as painful as his heartache. The will to fight leaves him completely.

From the corner of his eye, Izuku sees Pegasus descend with Shouto and Gran Torino in tow. If he'd been able to think straight, he would have been surprised to see them together. Shouto hangs back, wringing his hands with worry, but Gran Torino comes right up to him.

"What happened to all of the things you promised to do?" he asks gruffly. It's clear from his expression that he doesn't like seeing Izuku like this. "You promised to master your strength and go the distance."

Izuku hangs his head, unable to look at anything but the ground. "What's the point?" he murmurs. He'd wanted to trust someone, too, but all he'd received in return was betrayal.

"You told me once that you needed to get stronger, and quickly. It's true, and now's your chance to prove it, Izuku." Gran Torino points to the burning city, to the cyclops, who is approaching again. "Time is not on your side," he said sternly, "But neither is it on the side of your enemies. They won't wait for you to get stronger, or to become a true hero. The moment to fight is *now*."

Izuku's head begins to clear.

He'd gotten so caught up in becoming the best that he'd forgotten what kind of hero he *really* wanted to become. He gets to his feet and faces the cyclops, unsteady on his feet, but he's used to not having control of his awkward body. He'd made it this far, and now he's determined to keep pushing.

The cyclops swoops him up and he goes sailing upwards through the air, and he manages to grab a burning torch on instinct alone. When the cyclops brings Izuku to its face to laugh at him, Izuku shoves the torch right into the beast's eye.

The cyclops drops him and stumbles, pressing its hands to its wounded eye. Torino is shouting directions at him, and he grabs a length of rope from an abandoned cart. From his periphery, Izuku can see Shouto watching, much too close to the danger, his hands twisting together in fear.

But Izuku focuses on the task before him. He ties the rope around the cyclops feet, dodging its great, thunderous steps as it stumbles in pain. Izuku ties them together and pulls, pitching the cyclops off balance. When it tries to right itself, it trips over its bound feet and flails. The cyclops tries desperately to regain its balance, massive arms pinwheeling, but the effort only sends it over the edge of a cliff. It hits the bottom with a deafening noise and doesn't stir.

"Izuku, look out!"

He's peering over the cliff, waiting to see if the cyclops will rise, but Shouto appears and shoves him, hard, to the side. It's in this moment, as he tumbles back, that he notices the column falling right over where he once knelt, where Shouto is now on his hands and knees.

Izuku doesn't know what kind of scream tears itself from his chest when the column falls on Shouto. He scrambles forward, all of his pain and agony forgotten. His vision narrows and he sees Shouto only, lying pitifully beneath the cracked stone pillar. Izuku reaches for it and lifts, lifts with every ounce of his being, willing it to rise even if he isn't strong enough to move it.

Suddenly, his power returns to him in a flood. His body fills with relief and air, and the column rises. He throws it aside as if it weighs no more than a piece of straw.

"Endeavor's deal is broken," Shouto rasps, his voice pained. "I got hurt."

Izuku drops to his knees and gathers Shouto gently into his arms. His body is fragile in his arms, and Izuku feels like Shouto will fall apart at any moment. Fresh pain tears Izuku's heart into pieces. "Sh-Shouto," he carefully brushes a strand of hair from Shouto's face. He's crying when he asks, "Why would you do that?"

Shouto manages to smile weakly around the pain. He lifts his hand and gently brushes the tears from Izuku's eyes. Then he replies, as if it were obvious, "People always do crazy things when they're in love."

Blinking away the burning tears coming to his eyes, Izuku stammers, "O-oh, Shouto."



A soft puff of air escapes him, nothing more than the ghost of a laugh. Shouto's eyelids flutter, fighting the pull of unconsciousness. "You can still stop him, but you don't have much time."

"I'll watch over him," Torino murmurs, coming closer.

"You'll be alright," Izuku tells Shouto. He runs his fingers through the loose hair falling around Shouto's face and bumps their foreheads gently together. "I promise." Then, he's on Pegasus' back, flying through the night sky and towards Olympus, where he's sure to find Endeavor.

He reaches Olympus when it is on the brink of defeat. Endeavor had summoned powerful, elemental titans for his takeover and they are ravaging the mountainside. The gods are in chains, and Endeavor has All Might pinned inside a tower of volcanic rock.

Izuku first evens the odds by breaking the chains holding the gods back from battle. Endeavor is quick to command the titans to attack, but they're disorganized and clumsy. Endeavor is a poor commander, and gets caught in the crossfire of the battle. Izuku sees this and uses it to his advantage. He soars through the heavens with Pegasus, skillfully dodging lava and ice that do more damage to Endeavor than to him.

While the lord of the dead is distracted with shedding the ice he's under, Izuku lands on the rock spire encasing All Might. He breaks All Might free with his bare hands, tearing away the ice-cold rock as easily as if it were paper. Then, he's face to face with his father for the first time.

All Might is brilliant up close. His bright blue eyes are kind, and his golden hair and skin glow as if the sun itself were shining from within him. He smiles, beaming with pride, and sets his hands on Izuku's shoulders, saying, "Thank you, my son."

Their reunion is short lived, because there is still a battle to win. Instead of the heartfelt, teary moment Izuku had imagined, they fight side by side.

All Might rains lightning down on the titans, turning them away and forcing them to retreat down the mountainside. Before they can escape and wreak more havoc on the countryside, Izuku pursues them. He grabs the bottom of a titan in the shape of a massive cyclone and whips it towards the others. Rock, ice, lava, they are all pulled into the cyclone and Izuku puts every ounce of his strength into hurling them all into space. They sail out of sight, and meet their end in an explosion that lights up the starry sky. The gods begin to cheer.

Endeavor's yell of rage cuts through the celebration, and Izuku sees him mount his chariot. "You may have taken back this mountain," he shouts as he barrels towards the earth, "But you're too late to save Shouto."

Izuku's stomach flips, he'd been gone from Shouto's side for too long. He urges Pegasus towards Thebes, and they fly faster than they ever had before.

But when they land and he sees Torino's expression, Izuku knows he is too late.

Shouto is gone.

Izuku falls to his knees beside him and touches his face, lifts his hands, but Shouto's body is limp and vacant. He gathers Shouto into his arms, missing his warmth already, and lets his grief rock through his body. He broke the most important promise he'd made.

Torino places a gentle hand on his back, "I'm sorry, Izuku," he murmurs. "Some things you can't change."

Shouto's expression is peaceful, as if he'd slipped into a dream. The deep sadness hanging around him is gone, and Izuku finally begins to understand all the forces Shouto was working against. He'd been a fool to think Shouto betrayed him willingly, and now Izuku needed to make it right.

Determination fills him, and he decides, right then and there with his lover's body in his arms, to grab hold of fate and twist it with his own hands. "Yes," he says, "Yes I can." He has a purpose and a plan, so he gently lays Shouto back to the ground. He repeats his promise, his voice barely more than a murmur: "You'll be alright. I'll make this right."

Then, he goes to the underworld.

He leaves Pegasus at the entrance where it's safer and uses Cerberus, the three-headed dog, to lead him to Endeavor. The guardian beast leads him to a large chamber, not unlike those designed for temples.

Izuku wastes no time and descends from Cerberus with his fury on full display. He marches directly up to Endeavor, grabs him by the collar, and growls, "Where is Shouto? Return him, *now*."

Endeavor brushes Izuku's grip away and lifts an eyebrow. "I'll show you where he is," he says, but the way he says it sounds more like, *You won't win this time*.

Izuku follows him deeper into the underworld, and it is a sad, hollow place. Haunting cries echo from the cold, dripping stone walls. Endeavor's bitter resentment fills the air and Izuku can feel that this is no peace for the dead, not here. He can't leave Shouto in a place like this, with a father so terrible and vile.

He's led to a chamber with a deep, swirling river. Eerie green light reflects off the surface and dances on the stone walls, and a chill grips Izuku by the neck as he approaches. Endeavor directs him to the edge of the stone path. His expression is smug, but he doesn't say anything.

When Izuku peers over the edge, he sees the spirits of the dead. They drift in a bottomless current, following the flow of a river so deep that peering into it feels like looking into eternity. They float side by side, expressionless, crying, trapped.

Izuku spots Shouto near the surface, and immediately plunges his hands into the water to pull him out. It's so cold that it burns, and it feels as if his life is being pulled from his skin. His hands begin to wither away, aging decades in a matter of seconds, and he pulls his hands back with a gasp. Shouto drifts a little farther out of reach.

He turns back to Endeavor, his mind spinning with plans. "You like making deals, don't you?" He has Endeavor's full attention, and says, "Take me in Shouto's place."

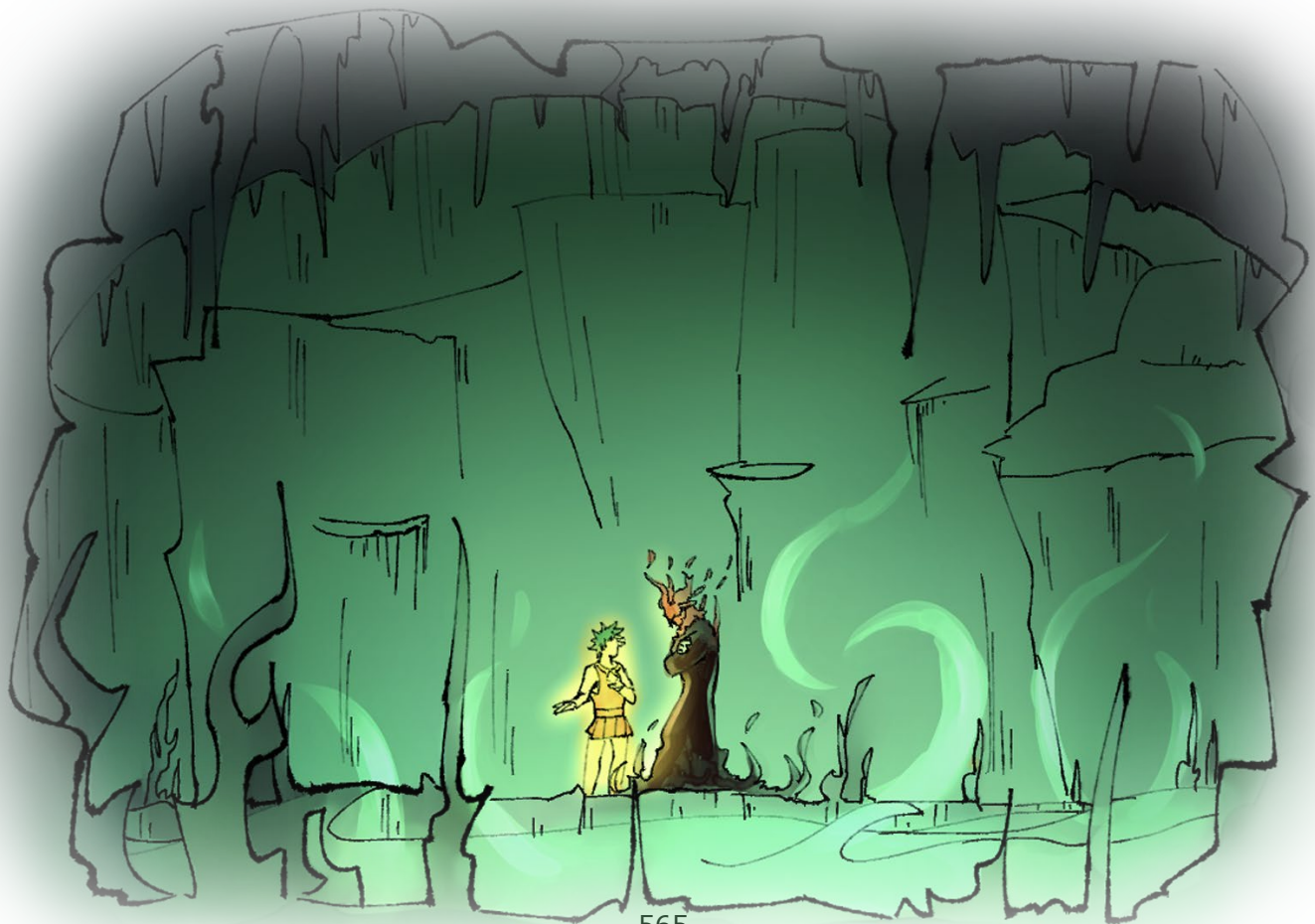
Endeavor's expression grows even more self-satisfied. He likes the idea. "All Might's son," he ponders, "Trapped here in the river of the dead for all of eternity." His gaze is piercing, as if he's expecting to intimidate Izuku into giving away the catch.

But there is no catch. Izuku will gladly take Shouto's place. Izuku threatens to rescind his offer, echoing Endeavor's words from the training grounds, "Well, Endeavor? Time is running out."

"Fine," he says, crossing his arms. "If you can reach him, Shouto may leave, but you will stay." They shake hands, and the deal is complete.

Izuku dives into the river of the dead the moment they release hands.

The water is a brutal shock. His entire body shudders and the chill of death slips into his very bones. Spirits reach out to him, brushing against his warmth in curiosity. He's withering away, but he can see Shouto, just a bit farther. He ignores the aching pain and pushes through the weakness. This is no worse than when his power had been stolen and his heart broken. He forces himself to go on through sheer power of will. Izuku's body is failing, but all he cares about is reaching Shouto.



He's so close. Izuku reaches out, his lungs seizing with the effort of simply being alive. The reserves of his life are leaving him, but he reaches out and grasps Shouto's soul— so much softer and warmer than everything else around him— and suddenly, Izuku is filled with heat.

His youth, his strength, his life, it all returns to him. The dead fall away and Izuku walks out from the river, Shouto's soul safely in his arms.

Endeavor hadn't expected him to succeed, and tries to stop him from leaving. He tries to intimidate Izuku at first, and when he ignores Endeavor, the god switches to begging. Strangely, it suits him better than his bitter confidence. When Endeavor tries to take Shouto's soul from his arms, Izuku sends him into the river of the dead, where the spirits begin to drag him under.

Everything is lighter, and Izuku is vaguely aware of the glow surrounding him. His godhood had been restored, but he pays it no mind. Izuku simply returns to earth, where Shouto's body is waiting.

With the utmost care, Izuku returns Shouto's soul to his body. His spirit, as light as a feather, drifts back into place, and the color slowly returns to Shouto's cheeks. He takes a startled breath and opens his eyes, which are bright with life. "Izuku, why—"

Izuku lets go of a breath he hadn't realized he was holding and smiles. He guides Shouto to his feet and puts his hand on his cheek. "People always do crazy things," he echoes, searching Shouto's face, "When they're in love."

Realization dawns on Shouto's face and his eyes grow wide with joy. They both reach for each other, relief and happiness twining together. Izuku buries his face in Shouto's shoulder and breathes deep, relishing the warmth and pure life radiating from him. They pull away to look at each other, and they're moments away from finally, finally kissing, but are suddenly swept into the sky.

Shouto clings to him, but laughs as they travel up into the heavens. Izuku holds him close, happier than he's ever been, and then they arrive at the gates of Olympus. It's dazzling, and all of the gods are waiting for them. At the center, in front of the shining gates, All Might and Inko stand side by side.

Izuku is stunned, but Shouto nudges him forward, encouraging him to meet his family for the very first time.

His mother reaches him first, her eyes brimming with tears. "Izuku," she pulls him into a tight, fierce hug, "We are so proud of you."

"Mother," he squeezes her, feeling a lifetime's worth of affection in her embrace.

All Might approaches him next, smiling so broadly that Izuku is dazzled. "Izuku, my boy," he claps him on the back before bringing him into a hug. "You're a true hero," he says, putting his hands on his shoulders. "I knew you could do it, my boy. Welcome home."

The gates of Olympus swing open, and the mountain top is gorgeous. It's every-

thing Izuku had ever dreamt of and more, and as the gods gather around and cheer for him, he can't believe that he's made it.

He wants to share this with Shouto, wants him by his side during the best moment of his life. Izuku looks back, intending to call him forward, but Shouto is walking away with his head bowed. Izuku makes a choice.

"Mother, father," he says, and the gods quiet around him. "This is the moment I've always dreamed of, but," he parts the crowd and catches Shouto before he can leave. "A life without love," he gazes into Shouto's eyes and takes his hands, "Even an immortal life, without Shouto, it would be empty." He smiles, and Shouto's expression transforms into a charming combination of disbelief and hope. "I finally know where I belong, and I wish to stay on earth with him."

Inko and All Might look at each other, and he knows that his parents understand. They give him their blessing, and Izuku's godhood leaves him for the last time.

Izuku doesn't really notice, and he doesn't mind. He'd been searching for a place to belong for his entire life, where he could be understood and accepted.

Shouto kisses him, and Izuku feels like he really has found home.





# Number One Good Boy

A Bolt AU by Sevan

*The legend of All Might, The Symbol of Peace! Number One Good Boy in the world, a golden retriever with enough power to take down villain organisations left and right! After being given the power of One For All by scientist Shimura Nana, he bowed to protect the world from devastation. But the evil All For One kidnapped the renowned scientist for his evil plans, so now All Might, with the help of Nana's son Deku, are embarked in a quest to end the reign of terror of AFO and rescue the scientist before it's too late! Watch their adventures every Friday at-*

"I can't believe it..." All Might whispered, backing away from the laptop set on the coffee table.

"I've told you, didn't I?" Eraser said, letting out a tired sigh. "Superpowers are a thing of fiction."

"It's not..." He shook his head, still trying to accept the proof that was presented to him.

How did he end up here, in a caravan park in the middle of nowhere, learning how he had been lied to his entire life?

"It can't be true..." He whispered, sitting down on the floor, ears down, golden fur framing his face.

He could recall the exact point the world turned upside down. It all had started three days ago...



"You'll see, this is always funny... Psst! All Might!" The hero was startled awake by a familiar voice. "I am here!" He looked up from his bed, following the sound of sardonic laughter.

"You?" The golden retriever sat down, staring at the two cats that were perched up in the open skylight.

"Oh, you don't sound really happy, don't you?" Shigaraki smiled at him. He wasn't fond of the white and grey cat, who had strayed away from Nana and joined the evil All For One in his dreams of world domination. "I thought I could give you a little warning, for old time's sake. Just consider it me levelling the playground for the game."

"Your Master will pay for his crimes!" Both animals laughed at his proclamation.

"All For One won't be defeated by a simple stray." Dabi, the black short-hair that had recently joined the ranks of evil, cocked his head to the side as he said this.

"I'll rescue Nana and prove you wrong, you wretched cats." They laughed again, and he barked at them in warning.

"Well, just be careful tomorrow, or you may lose something else than your scientist." With a flick of his tail, Shigaraki turned around and left, closely followed by Dabi.

Of course, All Might didn't take them seriously. They liked to come around and tantalize him, so it was just part of the daily routine. Besides, he was All Might! The Symbol of Peace! There was nothing that him and Deku, with the power of One For All that Nana had bestowed upon them, couldn't face together!

So when the teen came into the lab the next day, saying that they were going to infiltrate AFO's lair, he didn't think about Shigaraki's visit. Even when it seemed relatively easy to get past the guards and the silent corridors, something that rubbed him the wrong way, he still believed the cats were simply trying to make fun of him, as they always did.

And then everything went wrong.

One moment, they thought they had finally found where Nana was being held captive after pinning down two of the guards, and the next, Deku was on AFO's grasp, his fingers wrapped around the kid's neck in threat. He bared his teeth, ready to jump in, but the villain squeezed tighter, making the teen gasp for air.

"Sit!" He told All Might, and when the dog didn't comply, he raised his other hand, glowing red, near the kid's face. He reluctantly sat down, still growling. "Good boy. Now stay still while I get back the gift that your master tried to hide away from me."

"You damned, condescending-" A loud, high-pitched noise pierced through his entire being as a blinding red light was shone directly on his face, making him close his eyes and lay down.

As the light started to get dimmer, and the ringing on his ears began to fade, All Might was shoved into a cage with no time to recover or defend himself from the attacker. Once he could see a bit better, he noticed he was being carried around the lair by a man fully covered in a padded suit, no doubt one of AFO's nomu.

Fear started to slowly set in when he realised that his Carolina Bark was doing nothing to the cage or his captor, nor his California Dash made even a dent, leaving him dizzy for a second as he hit his head against the metal door. He tried to melt the lock with his Texas Heat Vision next, and when that seemed to do nothing, he used his Detroit Bite, but it was no use; his teeth, usually able to cut through anything, were now rendered useless.

The henchman finally left the corridors and went through a door and into a room that looked bare, except for a bed and two bowls that would likely be used for food and water. As the cage was placed on the floor, All Might noticed that the nomu hadn't closed the door entirely; he saw the faces of Shigaraki and Dabi peeking through the gap, snickering at the sight.

The second the kernel door was open, the dog busted out, jumping over the

crouching villain in pursuit of the cats, that had disappeared the moment they saw him leap forward. Once in the hallway, no Shigaraki or Dabi on sight, he tried to use his hearing and smell to either locate AFO and his pets, or with a bit of luck, where his arch nemesis was keeping Deku.

He started running with no clear direction, trying to follow any familiar scent while avoiding the humans that tried to capture him the moment they saw him. In one of the sharp turns he made, he tripped over something at the door, rolling down a ramp until he came to an abrupt stop, something that on the back of his mind he recognised as boxes falling and burying him, hitting him around as they spilled the contents over him.

The last thing he heard before he went unconscious was the fading sound of a metallic blind being drawn.

When he awoke, instead of trying to make his way out of the surprise cardboard and polyurethane tomb, All Might kept very still, eyes closed, trying to analyse his surroundings; there was a continuous vibration making his body slightly tremble, and he could hear a motor rumbling at some point nearby, so he came with the only possible conclusion.

He was on a truck.

Once he was sure no humans were in the same confined space as him, he slowly and painfully made his way out of under the boxes and small objects surrounding him, careful not to hurt himself any further, for the pain he felt across this whole body was enough for him. With One For All, there were very few things that could actually hurt him, so he wasn't used to the unpleasant sensation, but he was certain he would rather never repeat the experience again.

When he found himself free, he jumped on the sofa, grunting at the pain, and looked around. Even in the darkness of the truck, he could still recognise shapes, so he noticed that the boxes that had imprisoned him for who knows how many hours were everywhere; except for the couch he perched himself on and two lamps that were being held precariously by ropes tied to the wall, the entire truck was filled to the brim with cardboard.

He heard it before he felt his stomach rumble, painfully so, and looking around he didn't see or smelled any food nearby. For the first time in his life, All Might, the Symbol of Peace, didn't know what to do. Feeling suddenly very tired, he curled up on the couch, closing his eyes, ready to try and sleep it off.

Whatever it was that happened back at AFO's lair, it did a number on him, and he wasn't going to be able to do anything until the vehicle stopped, so he might as well reserve his remaining strength for when the moment came.

Hours later, he woke up by the absence of what had been a constant for the journey. He heard voices all around, and the metallic blind that served as door for the truck being unlocked. He prepared himself, ready to jump out the moment he was able to, leaving the problem of what could be awaiting outside for future him.

Once the light started to get in, All Might leaped forward with a bark, causing the man that opened the door to shriek in surprise. Quickly realising that he was noth-

ing but a civilian, and not one of All For One's brainless nomu, he looked around, assessing his situation and getting increasingly overwhelmed.

He was in an unknown city, a billion sounds coming from a million sources, movement calling for his attention from every direction, and the largest crowd he had ever seen in his life surrounding him but paying no mind to him. As he saw the surprised man approach him, he recoiled and started running aimlessly, wanting to find something, anything, that could help him find the way back.

He stopped by a group of dogs to ask for directions, at least a hint of where he was, and in his distraction he didn't realize the dog walker that had a handle on all the dogs got a hold of his collar, thinking he must've been set loose accidentally.

He didn't wait for the human to get a good grip on the leash before dashing away, the long rope dangling behind him as he ran. As he made a sharp turn left, he tripped and rolled around, coming to a stop when his head went through a park fence, the leash getting tangled with the pole in a way that made it impossible for him to get free.

He fought with it, biting it and growling, staring at it while trying to activate his laser powers, but it was no use. He sat down, gently whimpering, and it was then that two pigeons sat by the fence, asking him what was wrong.

He explained how he had been chasing an evil cat and his new accomplice before being trapped into a truck, and how he was probably the only way to find his kid.

The pigeons looked at each other, smiling, then helped untangle the leash from the fence, promising to guide him to the evil cat he was looking for.

And guide him they did, but not to the right cat. He saw him in the distance, perched over a back-alley dumpster as a bird left part of a sandwich in front of him, near a small pile of other half eaten food.

That's how he met Eraserhead, a very stubborn black cat with a scar under one of his eyes and a need for everything to be rational.

He managed to get the other end of the leash tangled with Eraser's own 'scarf', some ragged cloth that he wore around his neck, and drag him away from the alley, wanting the villain to show him his way home, or else he would drop him to the train tracks.

It was an empty threat, for the dog would never resort to that, but it seemed to do the trick.

The black cat was quick to understand the situation, so he agreed to help All Might. And if he could convince him in the process that all the superpowers deal was nothing but fiction along the way, all the better.

It was right after he agreed than they slipped from the bridge the golden retriever had perched himself up, ending up on the top of a moving train.

Before Eraser could say anything about waiting for a station to descend and assess the situation of getting the big golden boy home, All Might was already leaping out after a turn, when the speed was minimal.

They rolled down a hill, hitting anything and everything until they finally reached the bottom with a loud *thud*. Eraser hissed at him in indignation as the dog sat down, giving him a sheepish smile.

Hearing voices nearby, they walked towards them, finding a colourful and busy caravan park, kids and families all around them, having barbecues and making the best out of the nice weather.

They both heard All Might's stomach rumble, since the dog hadn't had anything to eat for over a day. Eraser had to let out a resigned sigh when he realised the golden retriever didn't know basic dog things, like beg for food.

Teaching him the best faces and postures to appear the cutest he could, he sent him to the barbecue area, where he was showered in pets and food that they both shared behind some bushes.

It was after being done eating that Eraser heard a familiar trill. He followed the sound to a small caravan, All Might close behind, being hushed when he tried to speak.

They perched themselves on the windowsill, watching a black and yellow cockatiel jump excitedly over a laptop's keyboard, searching for videos to watch.

"Mic?" He asked, sitting by the open window.

"Eraser? MY OLD FRIEND!" The bird immediately flew over to sit on his head, affectionately pecking his ear. "And who did you-" His sentence was cut short when his eyes landed on the golden retriever. "ERASER HOW DO YOU KNOW ALL MIGHT?"

"Do you know him?" Eraser asked, cocking his head.

"Do you know me?" The dog asked at the same time.

"What? Of course I do! Everyone knows you! You're famous!" The cockatiel looked genuinely confused.

"I didn't know I was famous, although the plan has always been to become the Symbol of Peace for everyone.

"Come in, I'll show you!" Mic chirped, flying back in and typing on the keyboard excitedly.

Hesitantly, they managed to enter the caravan in one piece, where Mic was already pressing play on a video titled '*All Might tv commercial*'.

Which brought the earth shattering revelation.



"A TV show..." All Might sighed, still having a hard time coming to terms with it.

"At least now we can't stop chasing the fake kid, we have all we need in here and-" Eraser was cut short by the dog.

"Deku is a good kid, he's *my* kid. He's not fake, and he must be worried sick." He countered. "Please, Eraser."

The cat sighed, resigned. If the golden retriever wanted to have his heart broken, he would just deliver him to the kid, like he promised to do.

"I'll go with you too!" Mic let out an excited trill, jumping on top of the dog's head. "C'mon, Mighty Boy, let's get you home!"

Using the laptop Mic used as his primary source of entertainment, his human usually out for most of the day, they planned out the route to get to Deku, which would take a lot of sneaking into cars and other transportation.

For All Might, their journey became more than just a long way home. Eraser and Mic seemed determined to show him all the things he had been missing from his superhero life: meeting other friendly dogs, playing with sprinklers, letting his head out of the window as the wind made his ears flop around...

It was in their last stop before the end of the adventure that the clear blue skies of trip gave in to dark, stormy clouds.

They were resting on an alleyway behind some restaurants, one of the best meals they had been able to score on their way, laying down contently before they had to sneak into a bus the next day.

Then Eraser brought up an idea to the table: stay there, where there was easy food every night, warm corners to curl up in, the safest place they would be able to find given the circumstances.

All Might had a bone to pick with that. He insisted that Deku was waiting for him at home, so the answer was a rotund no. It then escalated, both of them saying things they didn't mean, deciding they would part ways despite Mic's best attempts to keep things peaceful.

The dog was surprised to feel the cockatiel softly land on his head when he started walking away towards the bus station. He thought he was there to beg him to reconsider his choice; he couldn't have known how far from the truth he was.

"I think you need to know... Eraser had a family once, humans that took care of him and a white cat named Loud Cloud." Mic explained, his trill low and sad. "They were inseparable, those two. Back then, my human used to live next door, so we became friends."

It was hard for the dog to picture the same cat he had known, so against humans and homes, being a pampered house cat once.

"One cloudy day, they had gone out to explore around the neighborhood when the rain caught them outside." He buried his body in golden fur. "The car didn't hit the breaks in time."

Heavy silence fell in between them, the golden retriever sitting down to process.

"After the incident, the human family barely took care of him, until they just moved out and left him behind." He finished in a whisper.



All Might had a strong urge to come back and tell the cat he was sorry. He understood it must've been painful for him, to lose his friend and family, why Eraser was so reluctant to the idea of relying on humans, masking his fear and worry as logical arguments.

But he also felt going back to his kid was the right thing to do, that Deku wasn't like Eraser's family, and wouldn't just abandon him or replace him for another new pet.

He told so to Mic, who seemed to snap back to his cheerful persona, reassuring his new friend how everything would be okay once he got reunited with Deku.

When the bus arrived, they snuck into the suitcase compartment, the anticipation making All Might's tail wiggle excitedly, thinking about his imminent reunion with Deku.

Which made it all the more painful when, once they got into the city and located the studio, he saw his fears come true.

When he saw Deku, he bolted to get reunited with him, but stopped dead in his tracks when another dog, identical in appearance to him, showed up, his place no longer there.

Feeling defeated, he turned around and left before seeing how sad Deku actually was that it wasn't his dog but just a double they had found to keep production rolling, hugging his mother with teary eyes.

Luckily, Eraser, who had followed All Might in secret, worried something would happen to that delusional dog without him to add some rationale to the whole affair, was able to see this.

The cat ran to get that dumb dog back to his family. He managed to catch up right by the studio's main gate, ignoring the attempts of apology and getting straight to the important stuff.

While arguing outside the studio, All Might managed to hear a terrified scream that sounded just like Deku, so ignoring everything else, they all rushed back to the studio, the other two confused as the dog ran as fast as he could to save his kid.

There was a fire on the building, people rushing out and running for dear life. Hearing the plea for help from the inside, Eraser and Mic distracted the firemen for a moment so the golden retriever could sneak in.

He barked as he looked around, the blazing inferno making it really hard to see anything past the flames and smoke. A faint cough, however, guided him to his boy.

Deku was laying very still on top of a plank and didn't seem to register his dog's presence until he nudged his cold nose and pressed it gently on his hand.

The kid smiled at him, tears streaming down his face, relieved to see his dog again.

It was at that moment a light fell off the burning ceiling, the shards getting straight into his side and lodging in his chest. Letting out a whimper, he got a handle of the plank with his teeth, ignoring the stabbing pain every time he moved or breathed.

The building had become Hell itself, fire and pain and desolation as they moved around, trying to find an exit to the blazing maze.

He found finally an answer to his prayers: a vent, big enough to fit them both. But luck had it, it was completely sealed and blocked, so there was no way to press forward.

All Might fell to the ground, his legs unable to hold his weight any longer. His already damaged chest was full of smoke, and he knew he was suffocating, but he had kept on going, desperately trying to save his kid.

He looked behind him: Deku was lying on the ground, barely awake, his pained breaths and coughs getting weaker by the second.

He knew he had to do something, anything.

The golden retriever grunted as he stood back up, made sure to aim his body to the vent in front of him, and barked as loud as he could.

One, two, three, four times he gnarled, trying to get the attention of anyone who would listen. Five, six, seven, aware that his eighth attempt had lost strength.

He fell down again, but he kept barking, volume slowly decreasing, unsure if he was seeing a bright, white light pointing at his face, or maybe he was just imagining it..

When he recovered consciousness, he was laying down next to an exhausted but smiling Deku, his grin partially hidden because of the oxygen mask covering his mouth.

A kind woman with green hair was whispering to him, her voice reassuring as the paramedics checked on him. All Might couldn't remember meeting her, but the resemblance was too evident: that was the kid's real mother.

"What a brilliant twist, the press is gonna love this." He heard a voice coming closer, but the dog was too exhausted to look until the human was towering over them.

A big, muscular man with intense red hair and piercing blue eyes stared at her, his bright smile nothing short of prepotent as he looked down at the dog and his kid.

"Excuse me, Endeavor?" The woman faced him, her kind hands turning into trembling fists.

"They're gonna have a field day! All Might, the nation's beloved dog, a real hero! If we do a round of interviews, the ratings will be sky high!" He roared in victory.

All Might almost yapped in surprise when Deku's mother punched that gigantic man straight in the face, seemingly knocking him unconscious, his body dropping to the floor like a cordless puppet.

"Consider yourself fired." She said, turning back to a Deku laughing nervously and weakly. "We are done with the show business." Her tone was final, her attention back to her son, who was laughing in disbelief.

The next few days were a blur, as he got treated on the vets for his wounds while his kid, whose name he learnt was Midoriya Izuku, recovered in the hospital. In between all the issues to take care of, Mic and Eraser had been spotted by that sweet green-haired woman, Inko.

Instead of throwing them away, she ended up adopting them as well, brining all three animals and her son to a beautiful house on the outskirts of the city.

Due to his injuries, All Might had lost a lot of weight and strength, looking a bit like the shadow of his former heroic self. He had plenty energy to go around and play, but he needed more breaks and naps than he used to.

It was okay, though. His days saving the world from evil were behind him, so now he could focus on watching over Izuku as he grew into an amazing person, and spend time with his new family: Eraser, Mic, and Inko.

In all his years as the Symbol of Peace, All Might had been chasing endlessly for something, and now that he found it, he wasn't going to let go.

He found a family.

He was finally home.







# The King

A *Lion King* AU by Remiruen

The eight-year old Katsuki awoke to the almost pitch darkness of the kingdom outside. Lanterns had illuminated the empty streets and the blonde bundle of energy rose with a glint of excitement laced in his eyes.

He jumped out of his messy covers and ran towards the room where his parents slept. Not caring for how loud he was, Katsuki threw the heavy wooden door open and sprinted to the bed, effectively jumping onto the sleeping figures of the queen and king.

"Dad! Dad, wake up!" he said excitedly, pulling the blanket from his father's head. "Dad? Daaaad. Dad dad dad dad dad. Daaaa—"

The queen stirred and groaned as she moved the weight of Katsuki onto her spouse. "Your son is awake," she said, rubbing her sleep filled eyes. Katsuki was still jumping about, trying to wake the sleeping king.

"Before sunrise," he started with a yawn, "he's *your* son." All Might turned to fall back asleep, causing the loud eight-year old to fall from the bed. With a thump and loud exclamation of *OW*, he was back on the bed in no time.

"Dad! You *promised*," he said with his best puppy eyes.

All Might crumbled at that. "Fine," he said, finally awake. "I'm up, I'm up." Katsuki let out a whoop of joy and hastily climbed off of the bed.

All Might strolled down the hall, a regal air about him, towards the map room. All of the servants bowed in his presence. Katsuki bounded after him with the queen following shortly behind. Once they got there, All Might opened the glass doors that faced the east. He nodded for Katsuki to join him, and now that they were here, the boy was hesitant. The queen ruffled his spiky hair and gave him a slight push forward.

"Go on, Katsuki. Your father is waiting."

With that, the young prince made his way to where his father stood. The sun was peeking out of the horizon to greet the new day and Katsuki, although he's seen it about a million bajillion times before, gaped in awe at how it covered the land in liquid gold. Every crevice of the kingdom lit up in the sun's glow. No matter how many times he'd seen it before, Katsuki would fall in love with the sun more and more each and every time.

"You see, Katsuki," All Might started, resting a hand on the boy's shoulder. "Everything the light touches is our kingdom."



Katsuki stared in delight at the ever-expanding mass of light reaching over the land that his father ruled over. He then noticed a dark patch in the distance. And although it was surrounded by light, its presence seemed to possess Katsuki and demand his attention.

He nudged his father's arm, grabbing his attention. "Hey, dad, what's that?" He asked, pointing over.

The king's expression darkened and with a warning tone, he warned Katsuki to never step near that place. Katsuki giggled. He could handle anything!

His father turned to him, his face showing nothing but seriousness. "This isn't a joking matter, Katsuki. You must promise me to never go near there, no matter how much it calls out to you. No matter who tells you to."

The blonde felt a chill go through his body as he agreed to his father's request. Instantly, the mood lightened and an easy smile grew upon the king's face. They descended down the flight of stairs and left the castle, laughing at their small inside jokes.

The streets were understandably crowd free, with only the early risers and shop keepers awake, getting ready for the oncoming traffic later in the day. "Is there a reason?" Katsuki asked, bringing up their previous conversation.

"That place is beyond our borders. No one quite knows what or who lurks there."

"But... I thought a king could do anything he wanted?" Katsuki inquired, pausing as his father bought a loaf of bread from one of the merchants.

"Oh, there's more to being a king than getting your way all of the time," All Might stated, tearing a chunk of the bread and giving the other half to his son. "Katsuki, everything you see exists together. As a king, you need to understand that balance and maintain the peace of your kingdom."

Katsuki nodded, albeit a bit confused. "But, dad, aren't we better than these merchants?"

All Might gasped, and quickly shushed Katsuki. "Son, you mustn't say that. Let me explain. Everyone, in the beginning, began the same. We're all humans at our core and nothing can change that. The merchants sell their products to us and in turn we give them money and land. And so we are all connected in the great Circle of Life."

"Good morning, Your Highnesses!" a familiar voice came, not far from where the two were walking. Instantly, Katsuki knew who it was. He rolled his eyes in annoyance at the green haired advisor that quickly made his way to them.

"Good morning, Midoriya," All Might said, a fondness present in his voice. Katsuki turned, hiding his scowl from his father.

"I'm here to check in with the morning report!"

His voice faded to the background, noticeable, but faint, as Katsuki and All Might continued walking and conversing.



"Uncle! Guess what?" The young Katsuki shouted as he entered his uncle's chambers. The prince walked in, shoulders back and chin high. It was clear he had something to show off to his uncle.

His uncle rolled his eyes, "I hate guessing games."

"*I'm* going to be the king! Dad showed me the kingdom and I get to rule it all," he said, a greedy glint in his eyes.

His uncle sat on his bed, pulling on his boots. "He showed you the whole kingdom, did he?"

Katsuki shivered at the dangerous aura his uncle projected. He knew that his uncle would never do anything to hurt him though. They were family and that's what always came first. "Everything," he said with a sort of finality in his voice. Katsuki turned to leave, done sharing his news.

Just as his small hands laid upon the doorknob, his uncle spoke. "What about what's beyond the northern border where the sun can't reach?"

Katsuki frowned, still turned away. "Well, he said I wasn't allowed to go there."

"He's right. Only the bravest people can go there."

"I'm brave!" Katsuki shouted. "What's even out there?"

"Ah, I can't tell you. I'm sorry, but I'm just trying to protect my favorite nephew."

"Puh-lease, I'm your *only* nephew," Katsuki scoffed.

"See? Even more of a reason for me to keep quiet about the LOV Graveyard," his uncle gasped, although something about it sounded robotic, "oops."

Katsuki ignored it, more interested in this new piece of information. "The elephant *what?*"

His uncle laid a hand across his forehead in dismay. "Oh dear, I've said too much. Just promise me that you'll never go near that dreadful place."

xxx

"EIJIRO!" Katsuki shouted, treading up the long staircase towards the servants quarters. The boy mentioned stood at a mirror, pulling his unnatural red hair up into a ponytail. Katsuki slammed the door open, startling him.

"Yeah, Kat?" He asked, throwing a side glance to the blonde as he held bobby pins in his mouth. Katsuki paused, frozen by an unknown feeling. He shook his head.

"We have to go somewhere!" Katsuki said, rushing over and poking Eijiro's arm.

"I'm kinda busy," he raised his eyebrows toward his hair.

Katsuki grumbled as a strand of red hair fell, framing Ei's face. "Here," he sighed, holding out his hand. "Let me do it."

Eijiro had a look of thanks on his face and let go of his hair. Within minutes, his hair was in a low ponytail. They descended down the many flights of stairs and raced out through the castle gates into the bustling city below. Midoriya trailed them on orders of the queen.

"So, where are we going?" Eijiro asked.

"The square," Katsuki announced loud enough for Midoriya to hear. He leaned in close to Ei and whispered a different plan. "We're going to the LOV Graveyard past the northern border."

The redhead's eyes lit up. He pointed back at Midoriya, "Ooh exciting. How do we lose freckles?"

*That*, Katsuki thought as he looked upon the town square bustling with people, *is gonna be easy*.



The two made their way down the rocky steps of the LOV Graveyard. Surrounding them were piles of broken branches and bleached bones. The whole place reeked of death and yet, it was so intriguing. They trekked farther down the creepy path, a sense of uneasiness making them sweat down their backs. Out of nowhere, a scream was heard in the distance and Eijiro huddled closer to Katsuki.

"I really don't think this is a great idea, Kat."

"Hey!"

The two screamed.

"Midoriya! You can't do that!" Whisper-yelled Eijiro.

"You two are in danger here! We have to go back," urged the advisor.

Katsuki laughed, trying to hide his fear. "Danger? Ha! I walk on the wild side! I *laugh* in the face of danger!" He walked towards a group of shadows, oblivious to the deadly energy it gave off. Ei and Midoriya followed closely, not wanting to be left behind.

"Ya hear that Dabi?"

"Well, well, well, what do we have here, Toga?"

"It looks like a bunch of kids wandered away from mommy."

Hysterical laughter and voices floated from the shadows and the three jumped back. Three ominous figures emerged and they circled around the children and Midoriya.

"Trespassers!" laughed the one with light blue hair. His face was cracked in several places and his eyes shone a blood red.

"Hah! I know you!" The one with jet black hair snarled. "You're the king's son. What was it? Kitty? Katerie?"

"Katsuki!" The blonde one blurted out. She was the only girl there and yet her presence felt like a weight against the main trio.

Katsuki grounded his feet. "Yeah, I'm the king's son and there's nothing you can do about it!"

"Actually, yes they can," Midoriya interjected. "We're on their land."

Eijiro, who had been strangely quiet the whole time, spoke. "Let's go, guys."

And with that, they ran.

They ran

and ran

and ran

and ran.

They ran until their lungs burned and their legs felt like jello. They ran until they reached the end of the canyon. They ran until they had nowhere else left to run. They were cornered.

The evil trio came slowly. Taking their time as if they were taunting the kids.

"Hey! You can't hurt us!" Katsuki yelled in his squeaky voice. The hyena-like people laughed. He yelled again.

"Hey!" His voice echoed around the canyon, seeming impossibly deeper than just seconds ago. Everyone looked up in shock at Katsuki. Their faces contorted into fear as a different person came into their line of sight. Standing there, at the top of the path, was King All Might himself. His sword was raised high as he took a leap and landed in between the two groups. His face held a look of pure anger.

"If you ever come near my son again..."

The three played dumb, acting as if they didn't know who Katsuki was. They tripped over each other as they scrambled to get away and soon it was only the king, Katsuki, Eijiro, Midoriya, and the suffocating silence.

"Dad, I-"

The king took a deep breath. "You disobeyed my orders, Katsuki."

They walked out of the shadowed land into the fading daylight. "I thought you were very brave," whispered Eijiro as he walked past Katsuki.



"Midoriya, take Eijiro home. His mother must be worried sick. And, I've got to teach my son a lesson."

Midoriya nodded, ushering Eijiro towards the castle. "Yessir!"

"Katsuki," the king called once Midoriya and Eijiro were out of hearing distance, "I'm very disappointed in you."

The boy's head hung low. "I know."

"You disobeyed me and what's worse, you put Eijiro in danger!"

Tears burned at the corners of Katsuki's eyes. "I just wanted to be brave like you," his voice cracked.

All Might sighed. "Katsuki, look at me." The boy glanced up. "I'm only brave when I have to be."

"But you aren't scared of anything."

"I was today."

Now, that caught the boy's attention. His father, the king of an entire kingdom was... scared? There was no way that could happen. Katsuki's eight-year-old brain could hardly process the information. He'd seen his father get thrown off a horse and come up laughing. He'd seen his father face his mother's dad head on during a family reunion. His father had faced numerous other dangerous situations and came out alive. How could he be afraid of anything?

"I was afraid that I would lose you."

"Oh," was all Katsuki could respond with. "Oh," he said again.

His father laughed. Katsuki smiled. "Yeah I guess that would be pretty weird if you've never been scared. But, I bet those people were even more scared!"

They laughed and Simba bolted off through the grassy flatlands. All Might chased him, smiling at his son's uplifted mood and lesson learnt. They ran around until both of them were exhausted and sore from giggling. They lay down in the grass, staring up at the endless sky. The stars shone brightly away from the kingdom's walls and the light.

"Dad, do you know what stars are made up of?"

"Let me tell you something that my father told me. Great people live in the stars. Our ancestors before us return to them when their lives here end. When you get lonely, just look out for the stars, and you'll always have someone there. Even when you get gray and old, we'll be right here."

"Really."

"Yes, Katsuki."



"Hey, Uncle, are you sure you saw the rare tiger lizard fish here?" Katsuki asked, climbing onto the canoe.

"Positive, Katsuki. I need to check something first so hang tight in there, okay?"

The blonde nodded, too focused on the shining water to fully absorb what his uncle said. All of a sudden, he felt the boat lurch and it was sent forward into the current of the river.

"AHHH HELP!" he screamed out for his uncle. But, no one was there. The river pushed the boat farther downstream and he was powerless against it. The only thing left for him to do was to duck down on the bottom and not get thrown overboard.

What seemed like hours later, but must've only been about 10 minutes, he heard a familiar shout.

"Katsuki!" The voice of his father called out. His face poked out of the boat. There, running alongside the edge of the river was his father. His uncle was following close behind. Katsuki's eyesight was blurred by tears and water. Everything was hard to make out, but with a lurch, the boat hit something.

Katsuki flew forward, hitting his head on the bench on the end of the boat. White dots flew around his vision and the edges were fading out to a dark gray. Still, his father was calling out his name. Still. Still. The world went still and after being in the rushing boat for so long. Katsuki, gathering up enough courage, looked over. There, the boat was stranded. Held in place by a flimsy log bordering the edge of a gaping waterfall. The thundering now made itself present and beat on Katsuki's eardrums. He tried scanning the forest's edge to see his father, but came up blank.

A thump shook the boat and Katsuki froze. Slowly, he turned to face the back of the boat. There, his father balanced on top of another boat, grabbing the boat Katsuki was on to keep them together. He held his free hand out to Katsuki.

"Dad!" Katsuki called over the roaring of the waterfall. He shakily stood and started making his way towards his father. Tears blurred his vision as he finally made it and grasped his father's hand. The king pulled the boy into his arms and hugged him tight. He let go, placing Katsuki on the floor of the boat, and started pulling them towards the riverbed with the rope tied to the bench. The empty boat budged free and made a mad dash towards the waterfall, coming to an untimely end as it departed over the edge.

As they reached land, All Might hoisted the shaking Katsuki out of the boat. Immediately, the boy ran behind a tree and threw up, emptying his stomach.

The boat lurched forward and All Might let out a shout for his brother, who had been lounging nearby. "Brother! Grab the rope!"

The king's brother yawned and walked over leisurely. The young prince was still squatted behind the tree, too absorbed in whatever he was doing to pay attention to the older men. The king frantically pointed out the slipping rope, but couldn't do anything as the boat was swaying away in the water.

The king's brother, OFA, his name was, untied the rope from the tree and held it



in his surprisingly strong grip. Betrayal made itself evident on the king's face. It hadn't happened yet, but he could already tell where this was going to end up.

"Brother! Don't do this!"

With a small wave, OFA let go of the rope, dooming his brother to an eternal sleep. Instantly, he put on a face of shock, as if he didn't just kill his family member.

Katsuki came out from behind the tree and his eyes grew wide as he saw his father go over the edge. "DAD!" He yelled out, his voice cracking.

OFA came up behind him, fake tears forcing themselves out of his eyes. "Katsuki, what have you done?"

"I was just... he was... it was an accident! He was trying to save me! I... I didn't mean for it to happen," he choked out.

His uncle walked closer to him, hugging him in a stiff embrace. "Of course you didn't. No one ever means for these... *things* to happen. But, the king *is* dead. And if it weren't for you, he'd still be alive. Oh, Katsuki, what would your mother think?"

Katsuki's red eyes widened. "Mom... what am I gonna do?"

The boy's face was buried in OFA's robes, soaking it through with tears and snot. OFA smiled sinisterly. With a satisfied grin, he told Katsuki, "Run. Run and *never* return."

The prince pulled away, fear engraved in his face. His dirty blonde hair matted to his forehead in a mixture of blood, sweat, and water. He turned from his uncle, from his kingdom, and ran deep into the forest.



It was dark. And he couldn't move? Wait a second. Katsuki stirred and heard voices at the end of his consciousness. From what he could tell, there were two males. Maybe they were around his age or a few years older. Their voices sounded unfamiliar, although that was to be expected. He *did* run far from his kingdom.

What.

He was being picked up and suddenly the darkness faded from behind his eyelids. Okay, so maybe that was just his arms covering his face. But still, he was being transported to a different location by two unknown males. Katsuki started thrashing around and he tried yelling out, but his throat was as dry as a desert. He may have been young, but at least he knew not to trust strangers.

Katsuki pried open his eyes, expecting to see two sketchy men carrying him to a dark and dingy cave. Instead, though, he saw a rainforest fast approaching. A lake sat right at the edge, fully completing the beautiful oasis-y vibe. As soon as they reached the edge of the crystal-clear lake, the person carrying him dumped him into the shallow end, and he sprung up, shocked by the cold water.

He was freezing, but the water felt Heavenly after traveling for so many days. In his hands, he held some water and drank it. The cool water slid down his throat and he instantly began to feel like a new person.

"Hey, are you alright?" asked a voice behind him. Katsuki had been so absorbed in getting rehydrated that he completely forgot about the people behind him. He turned to face them and was surprised at how young they were. They seemed to be only two or three years older than him.

Katsuki nodded. "I guess so."

The one with blonde hair spoke, "You nearly died."

"I saved you," said the black haired one.

That's when it came back to him. His father's death and how Katsuki just ran away. His bright spirit dimmed as the prospect of being alive no longer excited him.

The blonde one snorted at the ravenette one, seemingly oblivious to the change of mood coming from the boy. "Well," started the black haired one (and in Katsuki's opinion, kind of plain one), "I guess Denki helped a little."

"Thanks for your help," Katsuki mumbled, getting out of the water and walking back towards the desert.

"Hey, where are you going?" questioned one of them. All Katsuki could do was shrug and continue walking. "Gee, he looks blue."

"Nah. I'd say more of a pale bronze-ish."

"No, no, no. I mean, he looks sad."

Denki ran up to Katsuki and put a hand on his shoulder. "Hey, what's eating you up, kid?"

The other made a lame joke that Katsuki turned out and immediately became embarrassed that it fell flat. "So," he said, turning the attention away from his failed attempt at a joke, "where are you from?"

"What's it matter?" Katsuki answered. "It's not like I can go back anyway."

"Ah, so you're an outcast... That's great! So are we!"

Denki put on a reassuring smile. "What did you do?"

Katsuki hummed, still looking at the ground. He sounded empty as he said, "Something terrible, but I don't wanna talk about it."

"Good, we do wanna hear about it."

At that, Katsuki looked up, a bit surprised. Usually his mother would force him to tell her and fix whatever the problem was. But, here, it was different. Not telling people was kinda... refreshing. He was glad, now that he thought about it, that these people didn't pry. He still needed time to think about what happened anyway.

"Oh, come on, Hanta. Is there anything we can do?"

"Not unless you can change the past."

"Ah," Denki spoke. "My buddy Hanta always says to put your behind in your past."

"No! It's put your past *behind you*," he emphasized, waving his arms around.

"Look, sometimes bad things happen and you can't do anything about it, right?"

"Right," Katsuki said, kind of confused.

"WRONG," stated Hanta. "When the world turns its back on you, *you* turn your back on the world."

Denki grinned. "Maybe you need a new lesson. Repeat after me, 'Hakuna Matata'. It means no worries."



"Welcome to our humble abode, Katsuki," Hanta announced, the smile evident in his voice.

"You live... here?" Katsuki asked, completely not used to anything other than his plush bed back in his room of the castle. He looked at their home and was amazed to see so little stuff inside of it. There were two beds covered in plush looking leaves and a single window through the obviously self-made home.

"We live wherever we want," butted in Denki.

Although it may have been something he wasn't used to, Katsuki couldn't help but tell them that it was beautiful. It radiated a sense of home that the castle could never have. It felt warm and inviting, whereas his castle back home felt cold and dangerous at times.

Outside, he could hear the birds chirping and singing. This, Katsuki decided, could work.



"Hanta," Denki pointed to the stars up above them, "ever wonder what those up there are?"

Hanta huffed. "Duh, they're fireflies that just got stuck to that huge black thing."

"Oh. I've always thought that they were millions and millions of balls of gas burning far up in the sky."

"Denki, with you, everything is gas," the trio laughed and soon everything became quiet again. With, of course, the exception of the cicadas humming in the grass.

"Somebody once told me that the great kings up there are watching over us. Making sure to guide us through our journeys," Katsuki, all grown up now, said.

"Really?" Denki asked.

"You mean to tell me that there are a whole bunch of dead guys watching over us?" Hanta snorted. "That makes no sense. Who told you lies like that?"

A somber mood came over Katsuki. "That is pretty dumb, huh?" He got up, and walked away as the two could only dwell in what got Katsuki feeling like that.



Far off in the distance, stood a woman. She sat in silence, meditating to clear her thoughts before bed, when suddenly her eyes sprung open. "Katsuki is alive," whispered to the emptiness of her home. A smile lit up her face. "Katsuki is alive!" She shouted into the night. She rushed over to her wall, where an image of a small boy sat, crossed out by the belief that he had died. She grabbed her paints and drew a crown over his head, for he had grown into a man.



Hanta and Denki sang to a tune that only the two knew as they strolled down the path that they'd engraved after years of walking the same trail. Hanta laughed, absorbed into his own thoughts while singing the song.

As he got to the climax, he looked back, "Come on, Denki! Back me up!"

But, he wasn't there. Hanta searched around frantically for his other half when he heard a scream. *Denki*. He ran over to where he heard it and saw Denki hiding behind a tree.

"Hey, what's wrong?" Hanta asked the panicked Denki.

"He's gonna kill me!" Hanta laughed. *Who would try to kill a wimp like Denki?*

He peeked behind the tree, not believing a thing Denki said until he saw him. The warrior came closer, bringing out his sword in a cautionary way. He approached the two, but was interrupted by Katsuki, who had jumped and landed in front of the attacker with his own sword in hand. Now that wouldn't have surprised Hanta normally, but the sword in his hands confused the heck out of him. Here he was, thinking that he and Denki were teaching Katsuki the ways of peace, when he apparently had the time to go train using this sword he got from somewhere. Now that he thought about it, Katsuki did seem stronger lately. Like he was doing some training of some sort.

The two clashed their swords as Denki and Hanta watched in awe. They both moved with an air of elegance. All of a sudden, their fight came to a standstill.

"Ei?" They heard Katsuki ask in shock.

They back off each other and the warrior looking dude eyes Katsuki with a raised brow.

"Is it really you?" Katsuki continued.

The other glared at him. "Who are you?"

"It's me, Kat."

They did a double take, peering closer at Katsuki. "Woah. No way. Kat? It's great to see you! Where have you been?"

Katsuki smiled the brightest smile that Denki and Hanta had ever seen. "What are you doing here?"

"What am *I* doing here? What are *you* doing here?"

Hanta had had enough. "What's going on here?" He shouted.

"Hanta! Denki! This is Ei, my best friend! Ei, this is Denki and Hanta. They pretty much raised me out here."

Denki shyly nodded. "Pleased to make your acquaintance."

"Same to you," the redhead nodded, extending his hand. Denki took it, shaking it. "Oh wait until your mother finds out!"

Katsuki stared at Eijiro, his smile sliding off his face. "She doesn't have to."

"What do you mean? Of course they do! Scar told us all that you're dead. He told us about the river."

"D-did he tell you anything else?" Katsuki asked nervously.

Eijiro laughed, filled with joy. "What else matters? You're alive! Which means... you're king."

Hanta's jaw dropped. "Okay, now you've got your people crossed. There's no way our little Katsuki could be the king, right?"

"Yeah..." he said sullenly.

"Kat?"

Katsuki sighed. "No, I'm not the king. Maybe I would've been years ago, but not anymore."

Hanta, with his eyes wide and jaw dropped, looked at Katsuki in awe. "So... You're the king. And you never told us?"

Katsuki's eyes watered. He didn't want his friend's image of him to change because of one little piece of information. "But, I'm still the same guy!"

Hanta grinned. "Yeah! But with power!"

"Hey," butted in Eijiro. "Can we talk for a bit? In private."

"Whatever he has to say, he can say it in front of us!"

"Maybe you guys should go," Katsuki said.

Eijiro nodded and they excused themselves, leaving Hanta and Denki to wallow in self-doubt and awe. "You start to think you know a guy..." Denki trailed off.

Near the river, Ei and Katsuki sat closer than homes usually do. "I missed you," Ei said, resting his head on Katsuki's shoulder.

"I missed you too."

They look at each other, stars in their eyes. As Katsuki they start to pull closer, Ei nudges away and gets up. He starts running and without a doubt, Katsuki starts running after him. It was a scene in any classic love story. The boy chases his lover into the night. Ei stumbled, allowing Katsuki to catch up. He embraces the redhead from behind and Ei flips him over and pins him to the floor. From the distance, Hanta and Denki stared in confusion. *Is this... what you call flirting?*

Ei bent down, pressing a kiss to Katsuki's lips.

"And if he falls in love tonight," Hanta sang. "It can be assumed."

Denki joined in, "Our carefree days are history."

"In short, our pal is doomed."



"Isn't this a great place, Ei?"

Eijiro sighed. "It is. But, I don't get it. Why didn't you come back to the castle?"

They sat down, staring at the moon and fingers entwined. "I just needed to get out." Katsuki stated. "To find myself. To live my own life. And I did. It's great."

"But, we *needed* you at home, Katsuki." Ei begged. "You're our *king*."

"Scar is the king. Probably a better one than I could ever be."

Ei furrowed his brows. "Kat, you don't get it! The kingdom is *suffering*. The crops have been dying, the population is decreasing, we're running out of food and fresh water. Everything is destroyed. If you don't do something soon, everyone will starve."

"I can't go back. You don't understand."

Ei sat up and let go of Katsuki's hand. "What wouldn't I understand?"

"It's... no, it's nothing. Hakuna Matata."

"What?" Ei asked, genuinely just confused now.

Katsuki gets up and walks away. "Hakuna Matata. I learned it here. It means--"

"I don't care what it means! It's your responsibility to help your kingdom, Katsuki! You're the king."

"No. I'm not."





Chanting. He couldn't understand it, but it grew louder as Katsuki seemed to walk farther away from it. The dark forest seemed to echo the chanting and Katsuki wanted to scream. So, he did.

"Who's there?" He shouted into the night. Tears pricked at his eyes and he really just wanted to be alone right now. The still tender thoughts of his father lingered at the back of his mind and no matter how long ago the incident was, Katsuki would always blame himself for what happened. If he hadn't gotten on the boat that day, maybe his father would still be alive.

"Cut it out!" He yelled as the chanting got louder and louder.

A female's laugh. "Cut it out and it'll grow right back!" She giggled.

"Who are you? Stop following me!"

"The question is, who are you?"

Katsuki was taken aback by that question. Before the incident he would've told the lady that he was Katsuki Bakugou, Prince and future king. Before today, he would've told her that he was Katsuki. Just Katsuki, who had grown up raised by Hanta and Denki. An outcast, uncomfortable in his own skin. Now? He didn't know.

"I thought I knew, now I'm not so sure."

The lady laughed, and in the moonlight, Katsuki could see that she had bubblegum pink hair and eyes like gold. "Well, I know who you are. Come follow me, shhhhh. It's a secret."

Katsuki followed. "I'm a little confused. How do you know me?" Katsuki felt like he was being scammed.

"You're All Might's boy!" Another laughter fit ensued. They reached the end of the jungle and the empty lands full of grass began. "Bye!"

Katsuki ran after the surprisingly fast lady. "Hey! Did you know my dad?"

Abruptly, they stopped. "Correction. Mina *knows* your dad."

"But, he's dead," Katsuki began.

"No. He is alive."



Katsuki approached the castle, appalled at what the kingdom had turned to in the decade that he was gone. Instead of the blue and happy vibe, there was a gray overcast, drowning the kingdom in a gloomy feel. He surveyed the land and as he was doing so, his trio of friends pulled up behind him.

"It's horrible, isn't it?" Ei commented.

"Yeah. It is."

They snuck in through the gate and entered the castle. He was surprised that he still knew the layout after years of not going home. Although, he knows that never would have made it without Eijiro, who knew that guard rotation like the back of his hand.

They saw the guards guarding the council chambers and Katsuki immediately shivered. He knew those faces anywhere. The three people who had cornered them so long ago. They grew older, but nothing much about them had changed.

Katsuki nodded towards Hanta and Denki. "Stall them," he whispered.

The two looked back and forth, as if not quite believing this order. With a nod, they put on their bravest faces and marched out into the open. Within a second, the three whipped their heads to where the two were. They completely abandoned their conversation and stood up, walking closer to the duo.

As they were distracted, Katsuki and Ei quietly entered the council chambers.

"MITSUKI!" the voice of OFA echoed. "Where are your hunters?"

Katsuki winced at how his mother looked. She was thin and frail, nothing like the strong queen he used to know.

"There is no food. The animals have moved on and the farmers' crops are dying. We're in a drought and the water is disappearing," she said calmly with a straight face.

"You're not looking hard enough."

Mitsuki sighed. "You've doomed us. The only way to survive is to leave here."

"Then so be it."

Everyone in the room was appalled at what the King had just said. "You can't do that," she said, her voice gaining power.

"I'm the king, I can do whatever I want."

Mitsuki let out a sigh of disgust. "If you were half the king that All Might was--"

She fell to the ground as OFA slapped her. "I'm ten times the king that All Might was!"

Katsuki decided that this was where he needed to step in. He rushed over to his mother, checking to see if she was okay.

"All Might?" Scar said with a whisper. "No, you're dead." Fear was growing in his eyes. Had his brother come back from the dead to kill him?

His mother had asked the same question, but he just smiled at her. See her face brought back a whirlwind of homesickness and he embraced her tightly. "No, mom. It's me."

"Katsuki? How can this be?"

"It doesn't matter. I'm home, mom."

OFA's eyes were wide. "Katsuki?" He gained his composure. "Katsuki! I'm surprised to see you here... alive."

Katsuki pulled out his sword, pointing it at OFA. "Give me one good reason why I shouldn't rip you apart."



They stood, after a long battle, at the edge of a cliff. OFA's sword had been lost and he was cornered by the armed prince. "Katsuki! Don't do this, now. I'm your uncle!"

"You killed my father. Everyone knows it. You're no uncle to me."

OFA grasped for any way out, "But, it wasn't me! It was the LOV who did it! They wanted control. They wanted *power*."

Katsuki glared, unbelieving. "And why should I trust you? After so many lies you've told."

"What are you gonna do? You won't kill your own uncle," OFA said smugly.

Katsuki lowered his sword, just barely. "No. I'm not like you."

OFA let out a breath of relief. He wasn't going to die. "Oh, Katsuki. What can I do for you? Anything to repay my gratitude."

Katsuki, still iffy on whether or not his uncle was being trustworthy, repeated a saying that OFA had long forgotten. "Run. Run away and never return."

"Ah, of course," he looked around, not yet ready to admit defeat. With a stroke of luck, he saw a wooden branch at his feet from a nearby tree on the ledge. As quick as a fox, he bent down and hit Katsuki in the arm, knocking his sword away. OFA leapt up and tried attacking the heir, but was charged and pushed by him. He balanced on the edge, unable to keep his balance. With a thud, his body fell to the ground.

Rain poured on the kingdom, wiping out any fires that had lit up during the battle. Katsuki, Ei, Hanta, Denki, Mina, and Mitsuki, stood above it all. Observing the kingdom. The king was back.







# Contributor Credits

in order by first appearance

Abbyslullaby



Abbyslullaby

Tumbly



Tumblysss



Tumblyss

Mirror



Mirror  
and  
skedaddle



Moose



Hello  
spacelings

Ohmytheon



Ohmytheon



Lannlannz

Annoyingly  
Cute



Annoyingly  
Cute1



Annoyingly\_  
Cute

Rotten  
Candy Art



Rotten  
CandyArt

Inkymillie



InkyMillie



Amuk



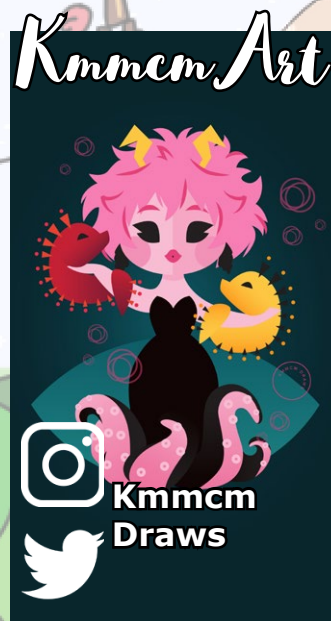
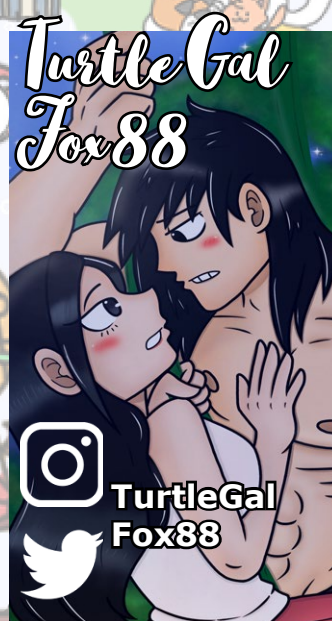
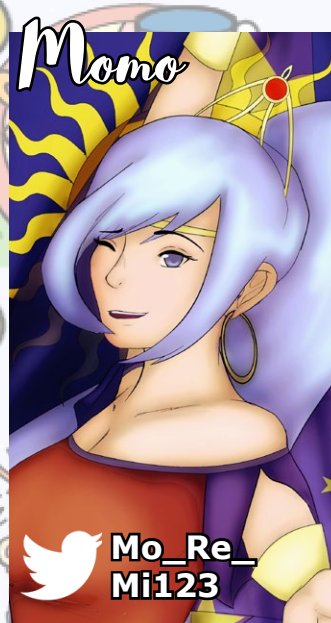
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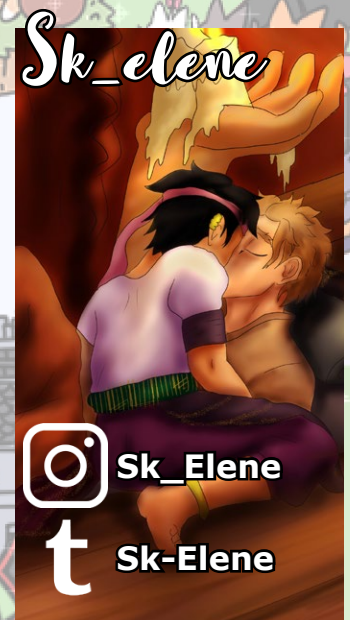
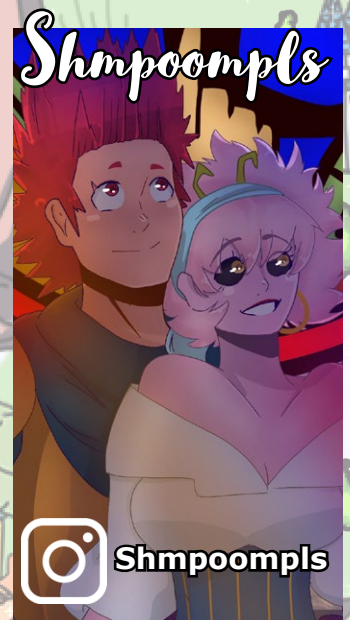
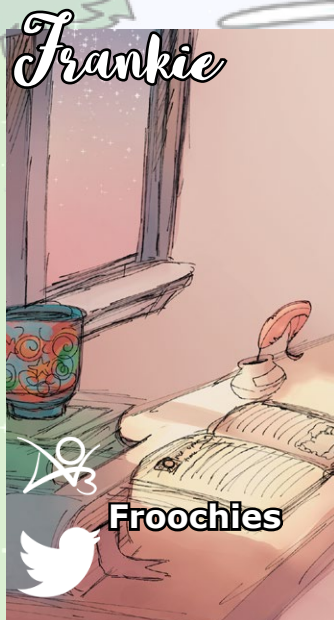
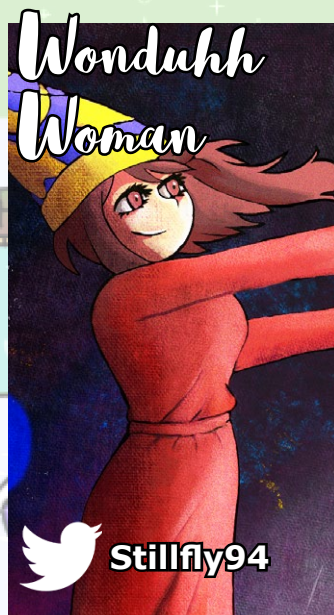
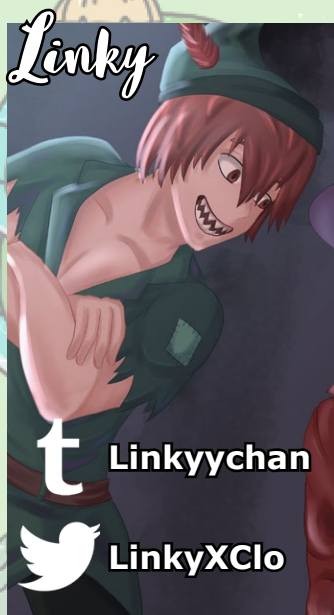


Kumeko



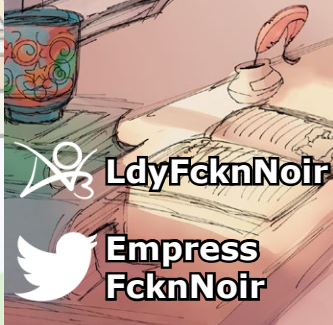








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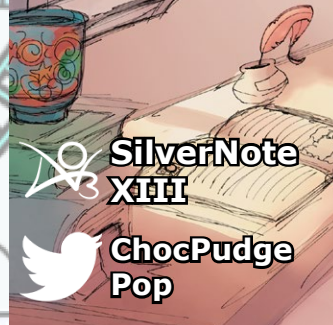
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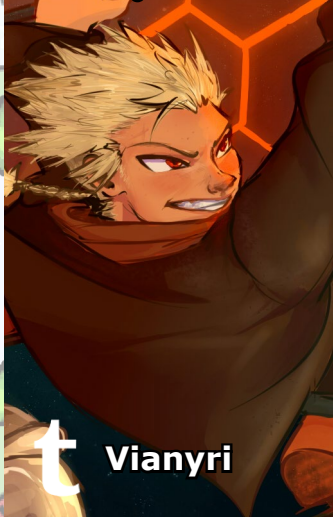
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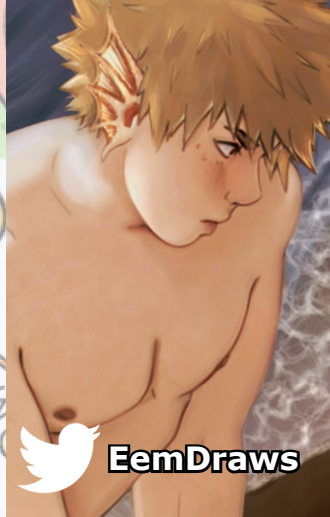
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Lights



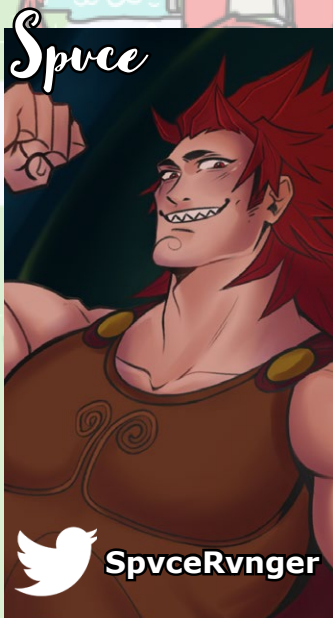
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Trish



Spvce



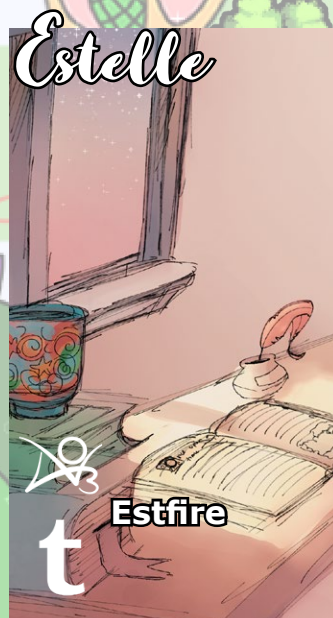
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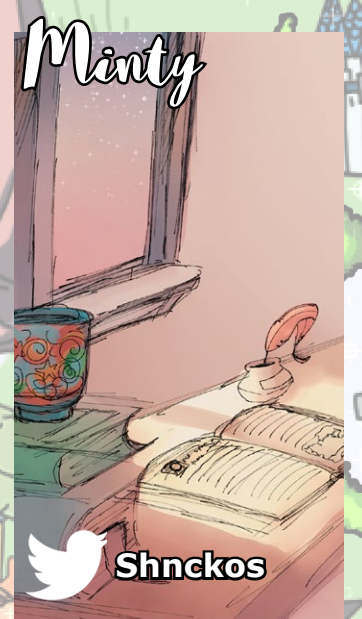
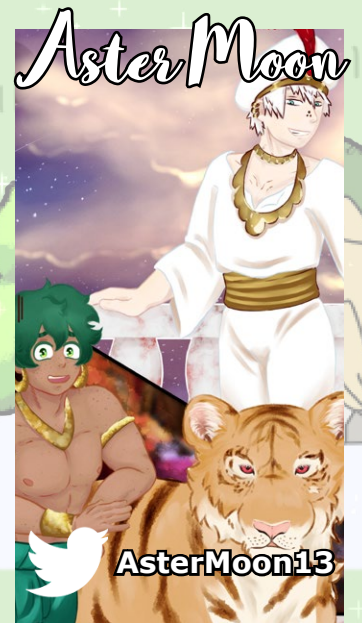
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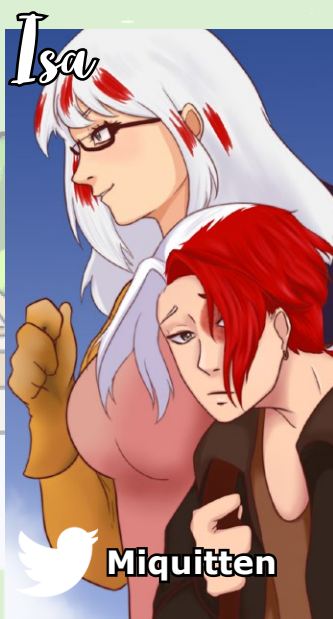
Estelle











Isa



Miquitten



juurenscha



juurenscha



Tigg



AnonTigg



AnonTGG



nicky



nickyFics



ncklpnn



Bubbles



MsBubbles  
Wow101



Esselle



Esselle



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Esselle\_HQ



Ashibble



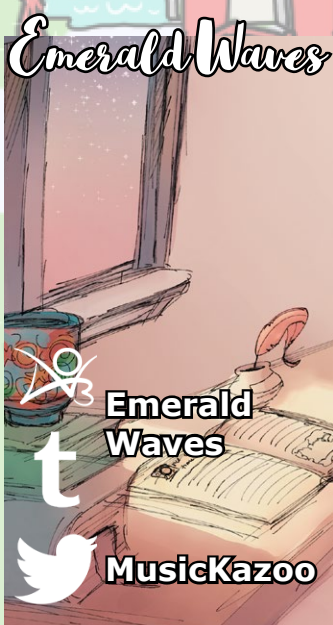
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Calen



CalenMiriel\_  
Art



Emerald Waves



Emerald  
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MusicKazoo



Millienerly



Millienerly



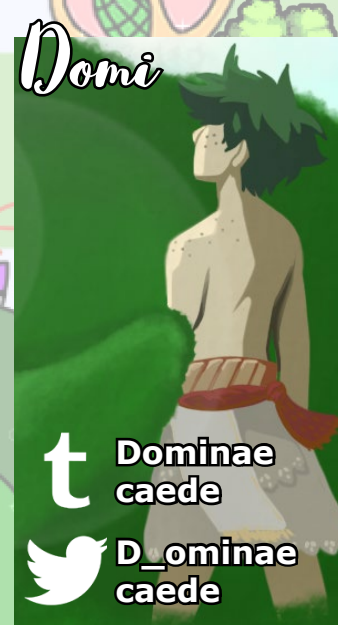
Jade



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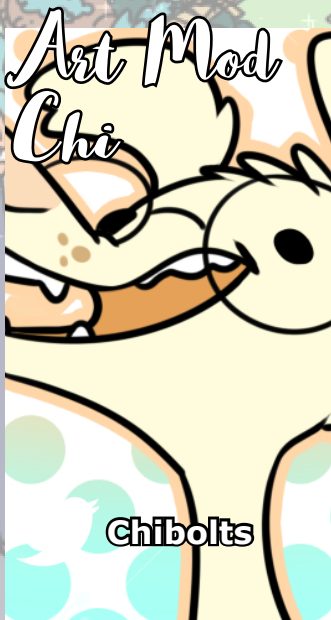
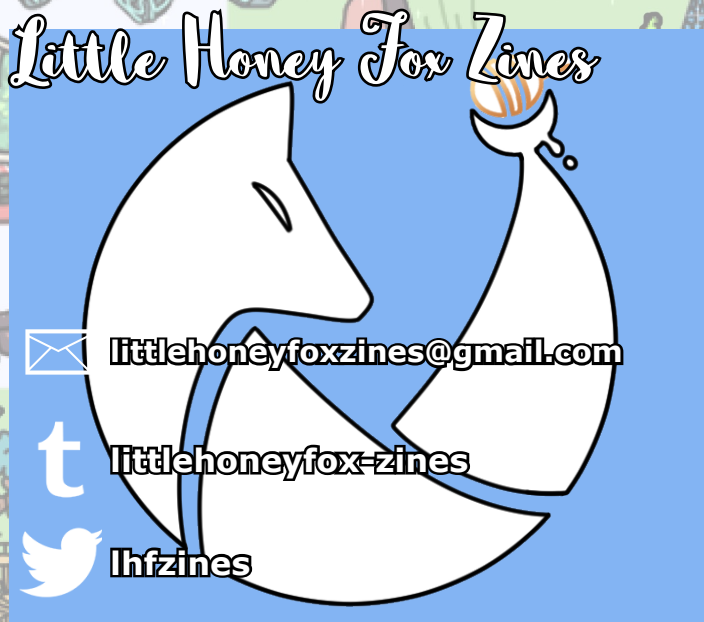
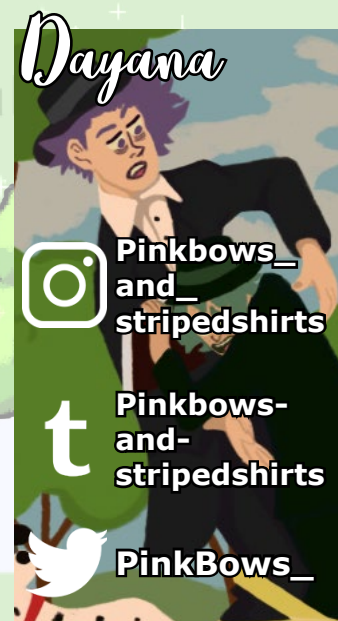


Dominae  
caede



D\_ominae  
caede







# Hi! It's Mod Linh!

You've probably heard this before, but probably not in this way:  
Thanks for scrolling this far!

Over six-hundred pages long, *Heroes Ever After* had been an absolute pleasure to work on. Of course, I must now reinforce the importance of drinking water and sleeping well and not burning yourself out because you forgot water was a thing and apparently vitamin water is not really "water" despite its name and missing sleep because you forgot to sleep in the first place isn't a valid reason to keep working past sleep. Oh! And remember to do wrist exercises! And stretches! And take walks!

Please put your health first before anything else.

Anyways, my terrible work habits aside—we must thank the contributors who worked so hard on their pieces! I've always wanted to do a zine without limits and they really did it! Look at that page count! Get a load of that art! Get a load of that cosplay! Get a load of those fics! Get a load! Get! A load! Woo!

Thank you, Honey and Chi for inviting me to this project and being so patient with me whenever I asked which shade of blue looked better and googled "how to \_\_\_ indesign"/"graphic design basics" repeatedly in order to learn how to indesign and actually graphic design for such a big project.

I'd also like to give special thanks to my dearest friend for her advice and support throughout this project. Even when times got tough and I went baby, you were there for me. You always have been.

I'm also just going to thank you, the reader, one last time for downloading *Heroes Ever After*! If you love someone's work, please drop by their social media! Give them a like, a follow, leave a comment, or my favorite way of saying thanks: a ko-fi!

*In order to reach happily ever after,  
you must first make it.*





Featuring 600+ pages,  
50 artists, 24 writers,  
1 cosplay, and tons of love,  
Heroes Ever After is here  
to deliver some lovely  
happily ever afters  
to everyone!